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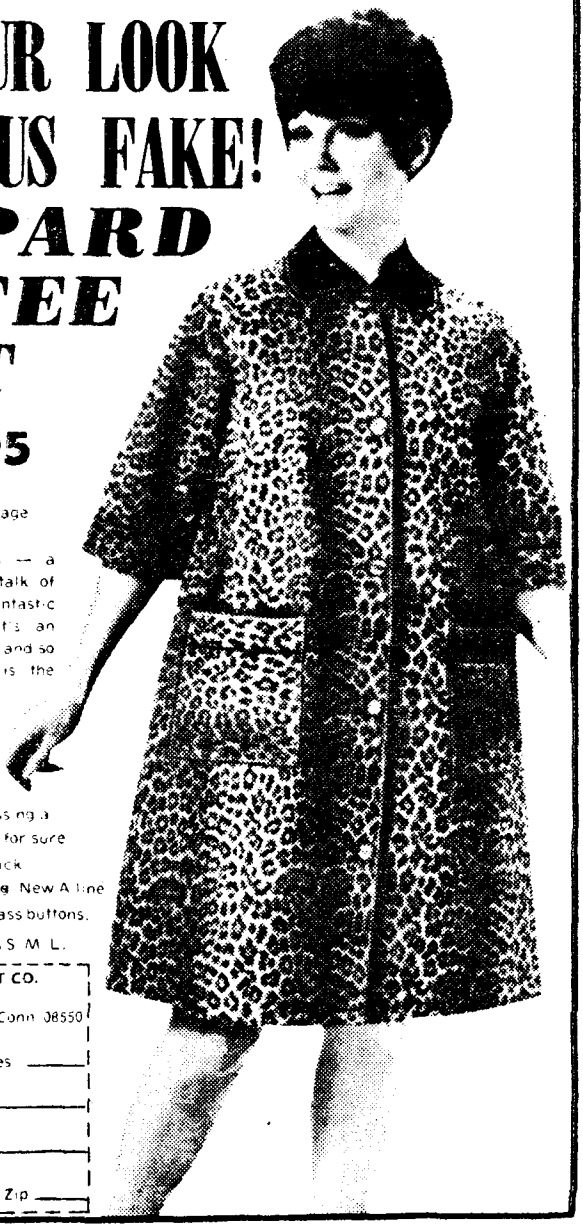

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THE PAYOFF

by STANLEY ELLIN

The four men aboard *Belinda II* watched the Coast Guard helicopter racketing its way southward on patrol along the Miami Beach shoreline.

"Handy little gadget," Broderick said, and Yates, echoing the boss man as usual, said, "Very handy."

"Depends," Del said sourly. He glanced at Chappie, who said nothing.

Broderick and Yates were in their middle forties, both of them big and hefty, with paunches showing under their yachting jackets. Chappie and Del were in their early twenties, flat-bellied in swim trunks.

Broderick, glassy-eyed with bourbon, squinted at his watch. "Thirty-five minutes. Last time was thirty-three. Let's call it an even half hour to be on the safe side." He looked Chappie up and down. "You sure that's enough time for you?"

Chappie said, "It's enough," and went back to whetting the blade of his clasp knife on the stone Broderick had turned up in the galley. The blade was four inches long, Bowie-shaped.

Broderick, one hand on the wheel, steadied *Belinda II*, keeping her bow toward the swells riding inshore, her motor almost idling. "You absolutely sure?"

Del said angrily, "You heard him, didn't you? What the hell

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you want to keep picking on him about it?"

"Because we are cutting down on the excuse quotient," Yates said. He was as stoned as Broderick, his face even more flaming red with windburn and Jim Beam. "Because we do not want to hear afterward how you couldn't do it because that chopper didn't allow enough time. Or any other excuse."

"Well, you won't be hearing no excuses," Del said, and Chappie snapped the knife shut and said to him, "Cool it, man. Just get that baby boat over here."

As Del hauled the dinghy alongside *Belinda II* by its line, Chappie shoved the knife into a plastic sandwich-bag, rolled up the bag, and thrust it into the waistband of his trunks. The outboard motor had already been clamped to the sternboard of the dinghy. Del stepped down into the dinghy, took his place at the motor. Chappie dropped down into the bow of the dinghy, untied its line, pushed off from *Belinda II.* Broderick joined Yates at the rail of the cabin cruiser, both of them watching with the same tight little smiles. Broderick cupped his hands to his mouth and yelled over the noise of the outboard, "Twenty-eight minutes left."

They were about two miles away from the towering line of hotels and high-rises along the shore. The sunlight was scorching, but a cool gusting breeze made it bearable. Del centered the bow of the dinghy on the big hotel dead ahead, the Royal Oceanic, tried to keep the boat from yawing and chopping too badly as it moved landward. He eyed Chappie who squatted there on the bow seat, rocking with the motion, his face empty.

"Suppose the layout's changed over there from the way Broderick told it," Del said. He pointed his chin at the hotel.

"Changed how?"

"Rooms, halls, you know what I mean. That was a couple of years ago he stayed there. They could have tore down things, built up things, so it's all changed around now."

"You worry too much," Chappie said.

"Because I just don't like this kind of a deal, man. We wouldn't even be in it if that big-mouth Broderick wasn't a mess of bad vibrations. Now ain't that the truth?"

"Nothing but," Chappie said.

"You see." Del solemnly shook his head. "Man, it sure is different from yesterday. I mean like up Palm Beach way when they said come on along

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and they'd give us a hitch right to Freeport. Fact is, I kind of took to them first look."

"Only way to find out about people is move in with them," Chappie said.

They were getting close to shore now. The swells the dinghy had been riding were taking shape as combers that crested and broke on the narrow, dirty-looking strip of sand fronting the hotel. Some people were standing in the surf. One of them shaded his eyes to look at the dinghy. Del swung it around, bow pointing seaward, and cut the motor. He stood up to gauge the distance to the beach.

"Maybe a hundred yards," he said. "Just remember the low profile, man."

"You, too," Chappie said. He slid overboard, ducked underwater, came up shaking the hair out of his eyes. He rested a hand on the edge of the dinghy. "Don't let it look like you're waiting here. Take a ride for yourself. Then when you're back here, fool around with the motor."

He went deep under the boat, swam hard, and when he bobbed to the surface on the crest of a wave he turned and saw the dinghy wheeling away northward. He let the next wave carry him half the remaining distance to the beach. When he got to his feet he found the water only up to his waist. Off-balance, he was thrown forward on his hands and knees by a following wave. As he pitched forward, he felt the plastic bag with the knife in it slither down his thigh. He clutched at it, missed it, and came up with a handful of slimy, oil-soaked seaweed instead. He flung the seaweed aside. Then he saw the bag, open now, the knife showing through it, come to roost on the tide line up ahead. None of the bathers around him seemed to take any special notice as he got to the bag fast, poured the water out of it, wrapped it tight around the knife again, and shoved it back into his waistband.

He stood for a few seconds looking seaward. *Belinda II*, a small white patch on the horizon, got even smaller as it ran out into the Gulf Stream. Overhead there was no helicopter in sight. Nobody to take in the scene and connect the cabin cruiser with its dinghy or the dinghy with the passenger it had just landed.

He turned, crossed the strip of beach to the walled-in sun deck of the hotel. A broad flight of concrete steps led to the sun deck. A life-guard type in white ducks and a T-shirt marked *Royal Oceanic* stood at

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the head of the steps, his arms folded on his chest, his eyes on the beach. As Chappie passed by, the eyes swiveled toward him, flicked over him, then went back to surveying the beach.

Lounges in long neat rows took up most of the sun deck. The rest was taken up by a big swimming pool, its deep end toward the beach, its shallow end not far from the rear entrance to the hotel. A lot of the lounges were occupied; the pool was almost empty. Chappie strolled toward the pool, stepped up on the edge of it.

"Hey, you!"

Chappie froze there. He glanced over his shoulder and saw the life-guard type walking toward him, aiming a finger at him. "You," the man said. "What goes on?" The finger aimed downward now at Chappie's feet. "Bring all that sand up from the beach, mister, you ought to know enough to take a shower before you get in the pool." He nodded toward what looked like a phone booth with canvas walls. "Shower's right over there."

Chappie slowly released his breath. Thumb in the waistband of his trunks, hand covering the bulge of the knife in the waistband, he went over to the shower booth, stepped inside, braced himself against the shock of cold water jetting down on him.

When he walked out of the booth the life-guard type gave him a nod and a smile, and he nodded and smiled in return. Then he went into the pool feetfirst, keeping a grip on the knife in his belt until he picked up his swimming stroke. He covered almost the whole length of the pool under water, hoisted himself out at the shallow end. It was only a few steps from there to the hotel entrance. Inside the entrance he was in an arcade, a coffee shop on one side, a souvenir shop on the other. After the searing glare of sunlight outside, the arcade seemed like a cool, damp, unlit cave, but by the time he had walked past the coffee shop he was used to the lighting. A door beyond the shop was marked *Men's Sauna*, and there was a steady traffic coming and going through it.

Chappie went in and entered a long and wide corridor, narrower corridors branching off from it on both sides. It was hot and close here, the air growing steadily hotter and more humid as he walked along counting, and when he turned into the fourth corridor on the left a smell of sweat became unpleasantly noticeable. The walls in this section were all white tile, and each door along

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the way had a lettered plate on it: *Steam Room, Dry Heat, Showers, Personnel, Service.* The door to the service room was wide-open, kept in place by a rubber doorstop. As he passed it, Chappie took quick notice of the shelves of towels and sheets there. Almost out of sight in a corner of the room, someone was hauling towels from a shelf.

When he reached the end of the corridor, Chappie leaned against the wall, bent down as if to examine an ankle, his eyes sidelong on the open door of the service room. Then a boy in sandals and swim trunks emerged from the room with a bundle of towels under his arm. As soon as he was out of sight around a corner, Chappie went into the service room and helped himself to an armful of towels. He carried them back to the end of the corridor which ran into a short hallway that crossed it like the head of a capital T.

The doors in this hallway were numbered. Chappie carefully pushed open Number One an inch and looked inside. The room was small and windowless, its only furnishings a rubbing table and a shelf on the wall with a row of bottles and jars on it. On the table a big man with the build of a football linebacker was getting a rubdown from a masseur.

Chappie left the door as it was and tried the next room. It was empty. The third room, however, was occupied. A man wearing dark goggles lay stretched out on his back on the rubbing table, a cigar clamped between his teeth and pointing up at the ceiling, a sunlamp brilliantly lighting his naked body. A white-haired man, skinny and wrinkled, his face and body tanned a leathery brown. Clearly visible in the glare of the sunlamp was a tattoo on one scrawny forearm, done in garish colors. A coiled rattlesnake, and circling it in bold print the words *Don't Tread On Me.*

Chappie looked over his shoulder. There was no hotel staff man in sight, only some customers walking around in sandals and bathsheets. He got a good grip on the bundle of towels under his arm and went into the room. It reeked of cigar smoke and was hot enough to make him break into a sweat as he stood there closing the door softly behind him. He could feel the beads of sweat starting to trickle down his forehead and chest.

The click of the door lock roused the man. Without turning his head he said, "Benny?"

"No, sir," Chappie said. He moved toward the table. "But

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he sent me in to check up."

"Check up?" the man said. "What the hell's he trying to do, fix up everybody in the place with a handout?"

"No, sir. But he said you're not to get too much of that lamp on your front and more on your back."

As Chappie walked over to the table, his toes struck something on the floor beside it. A plastic ashtray with cigar ash in it. More cigar ash was scattered on the floor around it. Chappie stacked his armful of towels on the foot of the rubbing table and picked up the ashtray, the clasp knife digging into his groin as he did so. He said, "If you don't mind, sir," and took the cigar from between the man's teeth and deposited it in the ashtray. He put the ashtray back on the floor, pushing it far under the table.

The lenses in the goggles were so dark that Chappie couldn't see the man's eyes through them as he leaned forward over him. The man's head was resting on a folded towel. Chappie lifted the head barely enough to slide the towel out, and found the towel soaked through with sweat. He dropped it on the floor and gently set the man's head down again. "Want me to help you turn over, sir?"

The goggles fixed on him. "You new around here, boy?"

"Yes, sir."

"I thought so. Well, if you know what's good for you you'll help me turn over so nice and easy I don't feel a twinge. Damn bursitis is killing me. So very nice and easy, you hear?"

"Yes, sir."

The man grunted and groaned as he was arranged on his belly. Then he raised his head a little. "What the hell are you saving those towels for? This thing is like an ironing board."

"Yes, sir," said Chappie.

He took a towel from the pile, folded it and slid it under the man's head. The man rested his head on it. "All right," he said, "now beat it."

Chappie glanced at the closed door. Then he came up on his toes like a bullfighter preparing to plant his *pics*, both arms raised, left elbow out as if warding off an attack. His right hand flashed down expertly, all his strength behind it, and the edge of the palm drove into the nape of the man's neck like an ax blade. The leathery old body jerked violently, the legs snapping backward from the knees, then falling to the table again, one leg shivering. Chappie came up on his toes again, struck again. The leg stopped shivering. The body settled down into the table like a tub of fresh

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dough poured on it. One stringy arm slipped off the table and dangled there, its fingers half curled.

Chappie pulled the plastic bag from his waistband, took the knife out of it, opened the blade. He pulled the goggles high up on the man's forehead to give himself room, then slashed off the man's ear with one stroke of the knife. There was no welling of blood, just an ooze of it along the line of the wound. He cleaned the knife blade hastily with a fresh towel from the pile, snapped it shut, and put the knife and ear into the plastic bag.

Coming out of the arcade into glaring daylight he was blinded by the sun and almost bumped into a couple of people as he made his way to the pool. He swam fast to the deep end, giving the diving boards there a wide berth, but as he neared the ladder at the deep end there was a sudden loud splash in his face, a blow on the side of the head that pulled him up short.

It was a girl who had jumped off the side of the pool and was now treading water face to face with him. She was about 16 or 17, her long straight hair in strings down her face. She pulled some of the strings aside and said worriedly, "Honest, I didn't mean that. Are you all right?"

"Sure," Chappie said. He rested his hands on her shoulders and she let them stay there. She seemed to like it.

Chappie saw that some of the people standing on the edge of the pool were looking down at them. He released the girl and went up the ladder. "Hey," the girl called after him, "are you staying here at the hotel?" but he didn't answer or look back.

The life-guard type was still at the head of the stairway to the beach. Chappie slowed down to a casual walk going past the man and down the steps. He took his time crossing the narrow strip of beach and looked out over the pale green water. The dinghy was rocking up and down beyond the line of breakers, its motor pulled up horizontal, Del pretending to fiddle with it. *Belinda II* was barely in sight on the horizon. She seemed to be stationary now, but it was hard to judge from that distance. Chappie looked up. No helicopter showing anywhere.

He waded into the surf, went under a couple of lines of breakers, and swam to the dinghy. As he hauled himself into the bow, Del dropped the motor back into the water, got it snarling into life with a quick flick of the cord. The dinghy aimed for *Belinda II*, bouncing

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hard, and Chappie said, "Don't make it look like a getaway, man. Cut it down."

Del eased up on the throttle. He looked at Chappie. "You do it?"

"I did it."

"No sweat?"

"No. He looked about ready to go anyhow. And you can swim right up to that door there. You don't even have to walk in front of people." Chappie spat overboard to get the taste of salt water out of his mouth. "There's some massage artist name of Benny who is in for a big surprise pretty soon. Maybe even got it already." He had to smile at the thought.

Del said, "All the same, man, you ain't getting near enough bread for this kind of a deal. And that Broderick is loaded. I mean loaded."

"All I want is what's coming to me. If I wanted more I would have told him so."

"Sure enough. But you know how much that Yates said that Belinda boat cost? Forty thousand. And that Caddie of theirs up in Palm Beach. Man, that heap had everything in it but a Coke machine."

"What about it? All they are is a couple of fat old men with a lot of money. You want to trade around with them, just remember that the fat and the old goes along with the money."

Del shook his head. "Then it's no trade, man. What happens after Freeport? You don't figure to come back with them two, do you?"

"Hell, no. I figure we do some of those islands around there. Then maybe Mexico. Acapulco. How does that grab you?"

"Any place as long as it ain't Danang or like that grabs me just fine." Del looked up over his shoulder. "And talking about that—" The Coast Guard helicopter was in sight again, loudly making its northward run along the coast. "Man, it makes me sick to even hear the sound of them things now," Del said. "I can feel that pack breaking my back all over again."

"Full field pack," Chappie said. "Stuffed full of those delicious C-rations."

When they pulled alongside *Belinda II*, Broderick was at the wheel of the cruiser, Yates was at the rail watching them. Yates took the line Chappie handed up to him and made it fast to *Belinda II*. "Well, well," he said, "look who's home again. And with a tale to tell, I'm sure, about what went wrong and why."

Chappie disregarded him. He went aboard the cruiser, and Del, after tilting the outboard motor out of the water,

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followed him. Broderick looked them over.

"Not even breathing hard," he said. "A couple of real tough ones."

Chappie went over to the card table where Broderick and Yates played gin when someone else was at the wheel. He pulled the plastic bag from under his waistband, turned it upside down, and let the knife and the ear fall out on the table. The ear was putty-colored now, its severed edge a gummy red and brown where the ooze of blood had clotted.

The little smile on Broderick's face disappeared. He released the wheel and walked over to the table, eyes fixed on it. Del immediately grabbed the wheel and steadied it. He said to Broderick, "What the hell you looking so surprised at, man? He told you he could do it, didn't he? And bring back all the proof you wanted, didn't he?"

Broderick stood staring at the table. Then he stared at Chappie the same intent way, wiping a hand slowly back and forth over his mouth. Finally he said in a thick voice, "You really killed somebody? I mean, killed him?"

Chappie nodded at the table. "You think he just lay there and asked me to cut that off him?"

"But who was he? My God, you couldn't even know who he was!"

"I'm in no rush," Chappie said. "I can wait to find out when we see the papers over in Freeport tomorrow. But I'm not waiting until then for the payoff." He held out his hand and wiggled the fingers invitingly. "Right now's the time."

"Payoff?" said Broderick.

"Man, you said it was your ten dollars to my dime I couldn't do it. So I did it. Now it's payoff time."

Broderick said in anguish, "But I swear to God I never meant you to go through with it. I never expected you to. It was just talk, that's all. You knew it was just talk. You must have known it."

"You told him the layout there," Del said. "You told him where to look for somebody he could waste. You were the one scared about that chopper spotting us coming back here. Man, don't you start crawfishing now."

"Now look," Broderick said, then stopped short, shaking his head at his own thoughts.

Yates walked over to him fast, caught hold of his wrist. "Listen to me, Brod. I'm talking to you as your lawyer. You give him any money now, you are really in this up to your neck. And you're not taking

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them to the Bahamas or anywhere else out of the country. We can make it to Key Largo before dark and they'll haul out right there."

Chappie shrugged. "Freeport, Key Largo, whatever makes you happy." He picked up the knife from the table, opened its blade, held it up, admiring the way the sunlight ran up and down the blade. Then he leveled the knife at Broderick's belly. "But first I collect everything that's coming to me."

Broderick looked down at the knife, looked up at Chappie's face. Behind him at the wheel, Del said, "There's two of us, man," and Broderick pulled his wrist free of Yates's grip on it, shoved his hand into his hip pocket. He came up with a wad of bills in a big gold clip. He drew a ten-dollar bill from the clip and held it out to Chappie. "For ten lousy dollars," he said unbelievingly.

Chappie took the bill, studied it front and back as if making sure it was honest money. Then he slowly tore it in half, held the two halves high and released them to the breeze. They fluttered over the jackstaff at the stern of *Belinda II* and landed in her wake not far behind the trailing dinghy.

"That was the nothing part of the deal," Chappie said. "Now how about the real payoff?"

"The real payoff?" Broderick said.

"Mister, you told me that if I pulled it off you'd come right out and say you didn't know what it was all about. You told me you'd look me straight in the eye and say there's just as good men in Nam right now as that chicken company you were with in Korea. Just as good and maybe a lot better. Now say it."

Broderick said between his teeth, "If your idea of a good man—"

Chappie reached out and lightly prodded Broderick's yachting jacket with the point of the knife. "Say it."

Broderick said it. Then he suddenly wheeled and lurched into the cabin, Yates close on his heels. Through the open door Chappie watched them pour out oversized drinks.

"Key Largo's the place," he said to Del at the wheel, and as *Belinda II* swung southward, picking up speed as she went, Chappie stood there, his lip curled, watching the two men in the cabin gulping down their Jim Beam until Yates took notice of him and slammed the cabin door shut as hard as he could.

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a NEW Ed Gorgon story by

JON L. BREEN

When you've got a good thing, we're told, flaunt it. Ed Gorgon, a Major League baseball umpire, is one of the most unusual of the new detectives to get his name into the bloodhounds' box score; and with baseball still in the air, with the World Series crackling on all sports pages, here's Ed Gorgon's second hit in two times at bat . . .

HORSEHIDE SLEUTH

by JON L. BREEN

Very few ballplayers chew tobacco nowadays. Those fuzzy-cheeked college boys with degrees in business administration and economics who populate Major League rosters chew bubble gum, if they chew anything at all. Sometimes they actually blow bubbles on the field, an act that results, in my opinion, in a certain loss of dignity to our great American game of baseball. Not that my opinion means so much--except sometimes. I'm an umpire, Ed Gorgon by name.

The point is this: Max "Iron Man" Arbuthnot is of the old school. He chews tobacco. He has little formal schooling, even if he's done enough book reading to let some very educated words sneak into his conversation now and then. Also, he came by his not-very-original nickname honestly. He is now 40-plus and still going strong, though he has slowed down to the point that last year he managed only 295 innings pitched instead of his customary 320 to 330.

The incident at hand took place a couple seasons back during a doubleheader between New Hopton and L.A. Funny things happen to me in New Hopton—I'd helped solve a murder there that same year. But the incident I want to tell about now was not a murder—if it had been, Max "Iron Man" Arbuthnot wouldn't have got in even 295 innings this past year.

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This was not your usual garden-variety doubleheader. It was late in the season—L.A. was out of the pennant drive and New Hopton, a recent expansion club, had never been in it. So ordinarily the game would have been a crowdless bore. But Max "Iron Man" Arbuthnot had an idea for making it a little more interesting. At this point I'll quote you an article from the preceding day's New Hopton *Express:*

"Modern-day ballplayers are pampered, soft, spoiled, namby-pamby—you name it. That's the view of Los Angeles Surfer pitcher Max 'Iron Man' Arbuthnot, in town to play the New Hopton Grizzlies in a three-game set this weekend.

"But Max isn't just talking through his tobacco juice—he intends to prove his point graphically on Sunday. He will attempt to pitch both games of a doubleheader, a feat unheard of in half a century.

" 'I see no reason why a current-day pitcher can't do what pitchers of the turn of the century could do,' Arbuthnot told this reporter. 'In that day and this it's just a case of an arm throwing a baseball. I know most pitchers these days can hardly get through nine innings without having to get bailed out by some relief pitcher, but I don't see that the times could have softened us up enough to cut our endurance in half. Anyway, not mine. So Phil (Surfer manager Phil Granger) has agreed to let me start both games Sunday—he has the right to pull me out if I need pulling, of course, but I don't think that will be necessary. I plan and expect to pitch eighteen innings of baseball on Sunday.'

"Arbuthnot, a steely-eyed, weatherbeaten, physically hard man with graying hair, makes you believe him, and his record of over 300 innings pitched the past seven seasons speaks well for his durability. And his assortment of pitches, featuring a knuckle ball and various other brands of 'junk,' doesn't put a very great strain on an ancient arm that has never been less than 100% sound.

"A late bloomer, 'Iron Man' Arbuthnot didn't pitch a Major League game till he was past thirty. In each of his last seven years he has made up for lost time, compiling records of 9-23, 21-14, 23-16, 17-22, 20-18, 19-22, and 26-11. It will be noted that Max has had a twenty-game season (in either wins or losses) each of those years.

" 'Iron Man' has always been a maverick. Even his choice of heroes is unique. Several years ago he solemnly assured this reporter that Batman (the

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indestructible TV and comic-book hero) had been one of his greatest inspirations, both as a youth and as a grown man. His other idols include such fictional private eyes as the two Mikes, Shayne and Hammer. Not a ballplayer in the lot.

"Can the 'Iron Man' pitch eighteen innings in one day against Major League competition, even the Grizzlies' watered-down version of that commodity? We asked some of his teammates their opinions:

"Phil Granger, L.A. Surfer manager: 'He can try it if he wants to. It's great box office and we're not going anywhere anyway. But the hitters are so much better than in the old days, a starting pitcher can't allow himself to coast. If he tries to pace himself for eighteen innings he's likely to be knocked out of the box. Twice.'

"Marv Fruitman, L.A. catcher: 'All I know is he's hell to catch. We'll need to use all three of our catchers here and call up seven or eight from the minors for Sunday. Do you have any idea how many of my fingers a guy like that could break in eighteen innings of pitching? No, I'm just kidding. I'm for him all the way.'

"Art Cream, slugging L.A. right fielder: 'No comment.'

"Lester Field, L.A. relief pitcher: 'I'm going to start warming up now.'

"Sam Dagowitz, L.A. pitching coach: 'He's pressing his luck, wants to throw it all away, ruin his arm. He'll be washed up next year if he goes through with this insanity. Remember, the question is not whether a man can pitch eighteen innings in a day. He can. The question is whether he can do it without destroying his arm.' "

An odd bunch of quotes, I think you'll agree. And these, remember, are from his *teammates*. Suggests his popularity quotient may be low on his own team, right?

To get into the story though:

"Iron Man" breezes through the first game. I'm working behind second base and can tell how much stuff he has on his knuckle ball. It dances up to the plate. I've never seen him so good. He wraps up the nine innings winning 3-1 and throwing well under a hundred pitches. Abbie Paul, a young rookie, catches him and does a fine job.

Max is in a real frisky mood all during the game, laughing and joking with everybody. In the fifth inning he gets a two-base hit. Like all pitchers he's proud of his hitting. He tells Gaines, the New Hopton

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second baseman, "I tried my Phil Marlowe swing and then my Lew Archer swing. But that hit was my Sam Spade swing." Gaines just grins. Later he tells me he never heard of those other two fellows but used to listen to Sam Spade on the radio in St. Louis.

Anyway, it's clear that if Max could actually get a hit (he's really a terrible hitter), he must be having one of those days when nothing can go wrong.

Between games it's announced that Marv Fruitman will start the second game behind the plate. Fruitman is a fine hitter but a barely adequate catcher, and I can imagine he's apprehensive about having to handle Arbuthnot for a full game—Max and the kid catcher Paul have been a battery all year.

It's almost time for the second game—the fashion show between contests is on its last well-molded legs—and there's nobody warming up on the sidelines for L.A. Then a rangy rookie pitcher named Vern Alexander comes sprinting out of the Surfer dugout and starts firing hard and fast at the third-string catcher, who yells at him to take it easy. They both look very puzzled. The kid is a little pale and looks nervous and exhilarated at the same time. The adrenaline is really pumping. The crowd starts to make grumbling noises, afraid—maybe justifiably—that they're going to be cheated out of Arbuthnot's grandstand play.

At this point Phil Granger, the L.A. manager, comes out, gulping and red-faced, and says to me, "Lineup change. Alexander to start in place of Arbuthnot."

"Something happen to 'Iron Man?' "

"Somebody conked him over the head with a bat. Sam Dagowitz found him out cold in the trainer's room off the visitors' clubhouse. He's already come to, and I think he'll be all right. But there's no question of him pitching the second game."

"Who did it?"

"I don't know. Could have been anybody, I guess. Most of the guys were in the dugout watching the fashion show. Max had gone to the trainer's room to lie down between games. He wasn't going to warm up much for the second game, wouldn't need to really—wanted to save his strength for the actual pitching. But a couple of minutes ago Sam thought it was about time, so he went in there to rouse Arbuthnot. He found him out cold on the table with a nasty-looking lump on his head. So we called the stadium doctor."

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"And the police?"

The manager looks a mite uncomfortable. "No need for that, is there?"

"Your best pitcher is assaulted and battered, probably by one of his teammates—"

Granger looks at me sharply. "Why do you say that?"

"Well, it was somebody that had access to your dressing room."

"It must be an outsider. None of my players would—"

"Then you should be anxious for an investigation. All the more reason you should want to know who did it."

Granger spits on the ground—a ballplayer's custom left over from the tobacco-chewing days which looks mighty unpleasant, especially on TV and especially without the tobacco. "Damn it, let's play ball," he says.

That's fair enough. I have no desire to be a detective again, nor do I have any authority over what happens off the playing field. So I'd better direct my energies, I decide, to working the second game behind the plate.

The crowd boos up a storm when it's announced that Max Arbuthnot won't pitch the second game. The public address announcer says "Iron Man's" arm got a little stiff and he decided not to risk hurting it in the second game. A transparent lie to anybody who knows "Iron Man," or has even seen him interviewed on TV. Max's ego would never have allowed him to back down on a boast on such a fragile excuse as that.

The New Hopton Grizzlies take the field to unenthusiastic applause. The crowds here can get quite up-in-the-air about their untalented club when they're in the mood. Today they aren't. Today they feel they've been had. The New Hopton catcher, Ben Butcher, is grumbling about the hometown fans and their shaky loyalty as he takes his position behind the plate.

"This is a hell of a place to play baseball," he says to me out of the corner of his mouth. "It's not bad enough there's not a blessed thing to do at night in this dreary burg, but the fans come out here to root for our opponents."

"I think they'll have enough of a mad on against L.A. to really be behind you in this game," I point out.

A crude expletive is Butcher's reply. "They think we're in on it. They think the whole 'Iron Man' deal is just another promotional stunt. Like Bat Day or Glove Day or Two-For-One Day or Ladies' Day. Just another gimmick to keep the

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franchise from going bankrupt. And I'm not sure they're wrong."

I start to reply, but the monologue continues as Butcher warms up his pitcher. "I wish I was back in New York or in L.A. or in some place that's got a little class. You'd think old Arbuthnot would want to do his stunt at home, wouldn't you? But they don't *need* it in L.A.—people come to the ball park there anyway."

"Well, he won't do his stunt today," I say.

Butcher turns around and gives me a grimace. "Yeah, right," he says, like a man thinking it's not so bad a day as he thought.

The supersleuth in me starts to think about motives.

Everybody hates Arbuthnot, it seems—his own teammates and guys from other teams. Butcher really seems bitter about it. Could he have conked Arbuthnot? Not easy for a player to get inconspicuously into the opposing team's dressing room, but it could be done. In disguise, maybe. Dressed as a groundsman or an electrician. Most of the players on both teams had been watching the fashion show.

Maybe disguised as one of the models, a mysterious knobby-kneed, hairy-legged figure in hot pants.

Give it up, Gorgon. It's time to detect balls and strikes.

With two out the third L.A. hitter draws a walk and Art Cream comes to bat. He's big and broad, always compared to a blacksmith by the reporters. He has a nasty look in his eye as he faces the opposing pitcher. Contemptuous. His hair, visible for an instant as he adjusts his helmet, is still 'fifties-short, a kind of defiance in this day of curly-locked, mutton-chopped ballplayers. Cream is a nasty customer—not a team man, some say, but a man always out for himself, for the little numbers in the box score, a man who wants to be the center of attention and usually gets his wish.

Powerful swing and a miss for strike one. An involuntary roar from the ill-tempered crowd.

Could he have resented Arbuthnot's grabbing space on the sports page that he thinks should have been his?

Another powerful swing for strike two.

Would one player risk hurting another out of jealousy? Certainly if Cream had been mad enough to hit Max with a bat, he'd have killed him, not just put him out of action for the second game.

As I'm thinking this, Art Cream illustrates it for me. He

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makes contact with a fast ball and sends it a long way, out to the deepest part of center field. He doesn't start toward first, just watches the center fielder drift back to the wall and make a completely hopeless leap for the apple. It's over his glove by a good three feet and into the parking lot for a home run.

"Not bad, eh?" Cream says over his shoulder, and he starts an around-the-bases trot that would make old Babe Ruth look like the Roadrunner. He is really arrogant, but the crowd loves it.

"See what I mean?" Butcher grunts. "These hometown ingrates." As he trots out to calm down his pitcher I wonder what the crowd ought to be grateful for—just the privilege of observing the grand and glorious National Pastime, I guess, even if the local club isn't any good at it.

The next hitter skies out, and the L.A. team takes the field.

Marv Fruitman, no longer fretting about breaking his fingers, is behind the plate for L.A. His kid pitcher, who hasn't had much time to warm up, looks wild as the March Hare, but his erratic fast balls are preferable to the digit-shattering knucklers that Max Arbuthnot would be throwing.

Vern Alexander, the kid, has made two starts since being called up from the minors, both of them terrible. Without the "accident" to Arbuthnot he probably wouldn't get another chance this year. Could that be a reason for putting "Iron Man" out of commission?

Or was Marv Fruitman so worried about breaking his fingers that he'd eliminate "Iron Man" from the second game?

All very flimsy motives, ump. You're not calling 'em, you're just guessing.

The kid gets in trouble right away. Two walks on eight straight high pitches. Fruitman goes out to talk to him, and the second baseman and shortstop come in to join the powwow on the mound.

Having been calmed down, bucked up, and given some good advice, the kid puts his ninth pitch in the dirt. It scoots past Fruitman and rolls to the screen, allowing the runners to go to second and third. Wild pitch.

The pitching coach, Sam Dagowitz, comes out from the dugout. Long palaver at the mound. The kid pitcher, rebucked up, recalmed down, and now superadvised, puts one right over the middle of the plate. Hard single to right and two runs score.

Phil Granger, the manager,

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comes out this time and the kid goes to the showers.

If it was the kid who slugged Max, he sure must have put all his strength into the swing and left his game at the scene of the crime, so to speak. One motive wasted.

Lester Field comes in from the bullpen to relieve and the game goes on. A motive for Lester? I doubt it. The whole thing is damned silly anyway. You hit a guy over the head with a baseball bat—but lightly so you won't kill him, just knock him safely unconscious. Or maybe the assailant was swinging to kill but just happened to get a part of "Iron Man's" skull that was harder than he thought.

In the third inning, with L.A. at bat, Lester Field hands me a slip of paper as he comes up to bat. I don't like this—if it's noticed by anyone there's a suggestion of some kind of collusion between player and umpire. I almost call him back but wisely decide to read it first. I hold it in my right palm with my ball-strike indicator and read it between pitches:

"Granger wants to cover up what happened to Max. Guy in checkered jacket in stands by third base was in locker room between games, talking to Max about some kind of business deal. I don't know his name, but have seen him before. He's sort of a buff."

Interesting, of course, but why tell me about it? My reputation as a one-shot super-sleuth, I guess.

When I have a chance I take a long look at the guy in the checkered sports jacket. I know him. Jake Sharp is his name, and he's more than a baseball buff. He's a writer, a ghost writer mainly. He once asked to write my autobiography for me, and I said if it needed writing I'd write the blamed thing myself. I once saw Sharp's name all by itself on a paperback mystery, but usually he's an "as told to" or he gets no credit at all.

Are the wheels now turning in the old umpire's noggin? My little gray cells aren't just whistlin' "Dixie."

An inning later I get a chance for a private word with Field. We're arguing about a play I called at home plate and he's almost too mad to talk about what I want to talk about. But I do get an answer to one question: What did they say exactly?

"I heard the guy in the checkered coat say something like, 'Melman doesn't believe in them, but I think he'll come around today.' Ed, you missed that play by enough to—"

Who's Melman? Could be

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Judson K. Melman, the king of the paperback publishers. But what doesn't he believe in? And why might he come around today? The ump suddenly has a little theory about that.

In the sixth inning the L.A. Surfers send a relief pitcher out toward the bullpen to warm up. Everybody in the place sees his number, 38, and they stand up and cheer like blazes. Max "Iron Man" Arbuthnot is back in uniform, headache or no. He touches the bill of his cap as he trudges out there, shunning the little golf cart that "modern" ballplayers usually prefer to get them there.

I'm a little surprised they're cheering him. Boos might be more appropriate. I figure the radio broadcasters, represented in the stands by at least a few hundred transistors, must have announced that he'd been hit over the head and that the story the public-address man had given out had been sheer invention.

"What the hell?" snarls Butcher, the Grizzly catcher. "The so-and-so's bounced back. And everybody's cheering him. Doesn't that warm the cockles of your heart?"

"No," I answer.

"Think he'll get in the game?"

"I'm sure he will—*STRIKE!*" Arbuthnot throws the last two innings of the game. He comes in with his team down 7-6. They rally in the top of the ninth—another home run by Art Cream—and win it 8-7. So "Iron Man" has posted two victories in the doubleheader, not eighteen innings but two wins. And I think Max "Iron Man" Arbuthnot must be a happy man.

The spread in the next day's paper makes me sure of it. For Max that day, nothing could go wrong and nothing did.

I notice that Jake Sharp looks mighty happy after the game, too. I ask him why and he tells me he's just won a bet.

"Who clubbed him, Ed?" It's the voice of a self-proclaimed old friend on the phone—a local newspaper fellow named Marvin Beal who'd like to be my friend when he wants information. Why he keeps trying I can't imagine, since he's given me no reason in the past to call him a friend. "You were there, Ed. Did you figure it out?"

"I figured it out. I don't know why I should tell you. Aren't the police working on it?"

"I have a feeling they've been asked to cool it, Ed. By the club. Like it's just an all-in-the-family deal. The club won't issue a statement to that effect, however, since that

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would seem to indicate a teammate had clubbed him."

"Uh, huh. Well, that wasn't it."

"It wasn't a teammate?"

"No."

"Who did it?"

"It's not my place to say. I'm a professional umpire. What goes on in the clubhouse is none of my affair."

"Give me a break, Ed."

I give the boy some advice instead. He is not grateful for it.

I get another call from another friend, only this time friend is *my* word for it. It's Sergeant Rojas of the New Hopton police. Since he doesn't represent a big mouth of newsprint, I give him my thoughts.

"I think I know who did it," I tell him. "But it turned out okay for everybody—the club got some publicity, and as for Max Arbuthnot, he might as well have been in on it for all the good it's done him. So I don't think you need to pursue your investigation. Nobody is about to cooperate with you on it. Except me," I add hastily.

"Who clubbed him, Ed?"

"A fellow named Jake Sharp did it. A ghost writer."

"A what?"

"A ghost writer. I think Max Arbuthnot has notions of becoming an author, or at least of having some books with his name on them, mostly written by Sharp."

"But what does that have to do with—"

"Look. What's one of the basic characteristics of fictional private eyes?"

Rojas pauses to think that over. "Well, they talk tough. They make wisecracks. They're ethical but unlawful. They spend a lot of time in bed."

"All true but you forgot one: *they always get hit over the head.* They see stars, they lose consciousness, but then they wake up, take up where they left off, and see the case to the finish.

"Arbuthnot had a thing about private eyes. Sharp, who was to be his collaborator, was trying to sell the idea of a series of 'Iron Man' Arbuthnot private-eye novels to Melman, the big paperback publisher. Melman was doubtful, because he has never really liked private eyes—preferred more realistic stuff, like procedurals.

"Sharp conceived the hitting-Iron-Man-over-the-head business as a publicity stunt, to convince Melman and get advance publicity for the book at the same time. He also had at least one bet going on Max's ability to bounce back from the clubbing—he had great confidence in Max's pride and the

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hardness of his head, and he'd taken great care to tap Max just hard enough to induce only temporary unconsciousness."

Rojas snorts. "That would be an easy thing to miscalculate. He was lucky. Who'd he bet with?"

"Maybe with Melman. Maybe even with a teammate of Max's—they all hate his guts. Max's unpopularity with his teammates also explains why Sharp wouldn't be too worried about being caught in the act. Who'd turn him in?"

Rojas is laughing on the other end. "Ed, you're putting me on."

"I'm not, I'm dead-serious. I'll admit I'm doing some guessing, but I'm definitely not putting you on. My theory fits the facts."

"A private eye would go out afterwards and pick up some beautiful blonde."

"Maybe Max did that, too."

I was right—my theory, I mean.

The series of paperback mysteries about a combination private investigator and baseball scout, Brick Stone, signed by Max "Iron Man" Arbuthnot, has proved a big success, and Max is now as famous in *Publisher's Weekly* as in *The Sporting News.* He no longer has to pitch for a living, but he still does because he's of the old school. Also, he loves to bask in the hatred of his colleagues.

I wonder if Max ever found out who clubbed him. I doubt it, because Jake Sharp is still in one piece. He made another suggestion recently that he write my memoirs. He didn't get anywhere with me, but in the course of talking it over he did mention he bet Melman $1000 that Max would come back and pitch in the second game, though he didn't admit to the clubbing.

EDITORIAL NOTE: Between the time we purchased Jon L. Breen's *Horsehide Sleuth* and the time we scheduled the story, we read the following in Newgate Callendar's column, "Criminals At Large" ("The New York Times Book Review," April 11, 1971): "Ever since the days of Black Mask, writers have had to tussle with the problem of describing the sensations of a private eye when he is hit on the head. (Private eyes are always being hit on the head. They are *supposed* to be hit on the head. That is what their heads are for.)"

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Joel Townsley Rogers' "The Murderer" first appeared in the November 23, 1946 issue of "The Saturday Evening Post." The editors of the SEP considered it "one of the most unusual mystery stories the 'Post' ever ran." And although a quarter of a century has passed since the story's first publication, "The Murderer" is still a comparatively neglected "classic" of its kind . . .

THE MURDERER

by JOEL TOWNSLEY ROGERS

John Bantreagh backed away from her a step on caving knees, with his gaze still on her. She looked so helpless, and somehow innocent, lying here on the meadow grass in the gray, still dawn, in front of his farm-truck wheels. In her white dress with its big red polka dots and red patent-leather belt, and her white shoes with their red heels. With her red mouth and light-brown curly hair, and her hazel eyes open.

Looking at him, it seemed like, out of dream-filled sleep, a little blankly. As she did sometimes in the early mornings, while he dressed quietly to go out and do the chores, with eyes wide-open, though not yet all awake. But, of course, she wasn't. There was an opaqueness on her lenses, there was a cold dew on her face, and she was dead.

One wheel had gone over her throat and the other over her sheer-clad ankles. Her legs had hardly been hurt at all, he thought; the ground was soft, and they had just been pressed down into the mire and grass roots. Only her throat had been broken—the trachea, the larynx, and pharynx, or whatever else there was in people's throats that made them live and breathe. That made them talk, too. Her eyes were on him, with that look they had. But she would never say who had done it.

John Bantreagh felt as if his own throat had been crushed, as he tried to pull his gaze away, with his knees caving. As if a heavy wheel had rolled onto

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it and—not like with her—had not backed away. He looked around him slowly with his reddened gaze. He had a feeling that other eyes were watching him, if not hers. But it was a lonely meadow, on a lonely road. Just dark pine woods around, and the dirt road two or three hundred yards away, beyond the tumble-down snake fence that bordered it.

His truck motor had died. He must start it and back down across the meadow to the road again. Get on back home before anyone was stirring. Let her be found by someone else. It would be hours, way off here—it might be even days. That would be too much to endure, knowing she was here. This evening, if no one had found her before then, he might suggest, just offhandedly, looking along here, as if it were something that had occurred to him without any reason.

There was just so much a man could stand.

The air had lightened from dark silver to pearl. It was not full light yet, but it was no longer night. He had never known a moment so quiet and still. Across the meadow grass he could see the tracks of his truck coming in at a diagonal from the road, through the break in the fence, where the weeds were crushed down that grew in the shallow roadside ditch and along the field side of the fence. Two parallel lines, with only moderate waves in them, coming directly to where his truck stood now with its front tires almost touching her. Smooth-worn front tires, but cleated rear tires, which had left their tracks of broad, deep, transverse ridges. They were a pair he had ordered from the mail-order catalogue, and had cost a lot of money. He had got them from the freight office only yesterday morning, along with the things for Mollie and the kids, and the rest of the order; and had put them on when he got back home, with her and the kids watching him.

Just yesterday forenoon, Mollie had been rinsing out some things on the back porch bench beside the pump, with her wrists buried in the wash basin, and soapy water splashing on the ground off the porch edge. She had paused to brush back her tendrils of damp hair with the inside of her elbow, squeezing out a handful of sand-colored fabric.

"You're proud of those tires, aren't you, John?"

"Sure am!" he told her as he knelt on the gravel unwrapping one of them. "I'll bet nobody else has anything like them in the whole county. Eight-ply, tractor tread, guaranteed for

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fifty thousand miles. Could have got a good-enough tire for six fifty less apiece, maybe. But it's smart to get something that lasts, as I can see it.

"I reckon you're pretty smart, John."

"Sure am, honey. I got you."

"How long do you figure I'm guaranteed for?"

"Till death do us part," he had replied, grinning.

She had laid the sand-colored fabric down on the bench and had squeezed out a handful of something black—her dark blue blouse, it must be, that looked black because it was wet. She didn't have any black things. She didn't seem altogether pleased. The tires had cost a lot of money. Maybe she was thinking of the nice things it could have bought.

"What are you washing out, honey?" he had asked her.

"Just my rayon stockings and some old things."

"Maybe some day you'll have a pair of nylons, so you won't have to take such care of those rayons. I saw Lilybelle wearing a pair the other day. I wouldn't know, but she said they were. I guess every woman likes them."

"Does Lilybelle have nylon underwear, too?"

She liked to tease him at times about Lilybelle. It was just a joke. She wasn't really jealous of Lilybelle. She hadn't any reason to be that he knew of.

"She didn't say, honey," he told her.

She had said something else then, brushing back her hair again, but he hadn't heard, having begun to pry one of the old bare-tread shoes off a rim with a mallet and tire iron. The kids had been jumping around and yelling, and she might have been reprimanding them... Vaguely, in the back of his mind, he wondered who would take care of the kids now. It was the first time he had thought of it.

His knees caved and caved. He had heard of men's knees doing that, but it didn't seem natural. He couldn't control them, though. He stiffened them, and they jerked down again as if they were only water. He planted a hand on the mudguard of his truck, taking a dragging step back toward the seat. He must start his engine and back down to the road again and go on home. Now.

There was no sound of distant barnyard roosters. It must be a good mile at least, maybe two or five, to the nearest house. If there was any wildlife in the woods around the meadow—fox, bobcat, possum—it was keeping very still.

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A car was coming along the road already, though. A sedan with some early driver at the wheel. It slowed its bumping progress as it approached the break in the fence. It came to a momentary halt. The driver had seen his truck and him in the meadow, John Bantreagh thought, standing motionless. Maybe he could see the white of her dress in front of his wheels, though the truck might hide that from the road.

The car turned and came in, anyway. It drove slowly along the broad, deep, cleated tracks of his truck, approaching. That it should take the same course was perhaps inevitable, or at least expectable. Every field, however smooth, has its own hidden soft spots, waves, and hummocks, and one car will tend to follow the same path across it as another, unless deliberately held to a different course. Particularly when a previous car has already made ruts at the grass roots.

The driver of the approaching sedan probably didn't realize that he was flattening out those cleated and distinctive treads beneath the impress of whatever nondescript tire treads he might have himself. Perhaps he didn't notice them. Or if he did, he considered their preservation of no importance.

It wasn't important, of course, thought John Bantreagh. His truck was here, he was here. He rested the palm of his left hand on the mudguard. His eyes burned red and sleepless. His throat was dry. His right hand hung down at his side with something in it. His truck crank, he realized. He didn't know how long he had had it in his hand. He had been quite unaware of it. He hadn't the strength now to place it back on the truck floor where he usually kept it. Not even to open his hand and let it drop into the grass.

The driver of the sedan stopped with his bumper nudging the back of the truck. He opened the door and got out. He was a big young fellow with a bronzed, square-jawed face and alert and steady gray eyes. He wore a black tropical suit, unbuttoned on an expanse of soft white shirt, black-necktied, and a black slouch hat. He overtopped John Bantreagh by four inches. His lithe, light-stepping frame had the massed weight of 200 pounds. He was a dozen years younger than John Bantreagh—perhaps he was 25. He looked fresh and well slept and newly bathed, competent and cool.

He pushed back his hat on his crisp black curls. He wore a nickeled badge, pinned to a red suspender strap over his white

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shirt. There was a polished walnut gun butt extruding from a black holster on his right hip, and a pair of handcuffs hanging beside it from his belt.

He gave a brief, alert glance at John Bantreagh's stained, red-eyed face and thin, shaking form. He stood looking down at the woman's body lying supine in front of the truck wheels, with his fists planted on his hips and his pectoral muscles expanded.

"What happened?" he said. "Run over?"

John Bantreagh swallowed. "Yes."

"It looks pretty much like it was deliberate," the big young fellow said quietly.

He squatted beside her, looking, not touching. With steady, alert eyes. With his alert and sleep-refreshed brain behind them.

"Name's Clade," he said. "Roy Clade, deppity, from over in Boomerburg. I was due at the courthouse this morning on a car-stealing case, and just happened to take the back road, first time in a year. Never thought I'd run into anything like this."

"No," John Bantreagh swallowed. "I reckon nobody would."

"Yep, she was murdered," the young deputy said quietly. "No two ways about it. Blood on the back of her head, matted with her hair. She was hit with a tire iron or something, and then laid on the ground when she was out cold, and the front wheels run up onto her. Know who she is?"

"Yes," John Bantreagh swallowed. "Her name's—her name was Mollie Bantreagh—Mrs. John Bantreagh—from over outside of Jeffersonville. Funny name, sounds like 'pantry,' " he said tonelessly—as he always did, to forestall banal remarks about it. "I don't know where it came from. Some say it's an aristocratic name in Scotland, but I don't know. She's—she was my wife."

"Your wife!" The young deputy shot up a quick keen look at him. "You mean you were her husband?"

"Yes," John Bantreagh said. "That's right." He could not stop the wobbling of his knees. The dryness stuck in his throat. He rubbed his Adam's apple with his left hand to relieve the pressure on it.

"Tough!" said the young deputy, in a voice of proper sympathetic pitch. "Your wife! Gee! I thought you were just some stranger driving by. I'm not a married man myself. But your wife—she must have meant an awful lot to you. I'll bet this has hit you hard."

"Yes," said John Bantreagh,

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feeling his throat. "We had our little disagreements at times, like everybody. I reckon the neighbors know. She always liked nice things a lot."

"All married people have their little battles, I expect," said the young deputy awkwardly. "It'd be kind of funny if they didn't. Gee, your wife, though! Kids, I suppose, too?"

"Three," said John Bantreagh. "Three. Two boys and a girl."

"And no one to look after them now, I reckon. Tough!" the young deputy said again, with an effort at feeling. "It sure is an awful break for you, Mr. Bantreagh. Who could have done a thing like this, anyway?"

"I—" said John Bantreagh, swallowing. "I thought maybe I could get Lilybelle to look after them for a spell. She's not very fond of kids, I don't think, but she might do it for me."

"Who's Lilybelle?"

"Lilybelle Turner, lives next place down the road," said John Bantreagh. "She's only a kid herself, just nineteen, and not seeming hardly that old, with her dark curls and blue eyes. All she can think of is having a good time and loving. Mollie—Mollie used to pretend to be kind of jealous of her, just joking. But she's a woman, anyway, and I reckon I can get her to pitch in and help with the kids, if the neighbors don't talk."

"There's always another woman, isn't there?" remarked the young deputy. "I mean there's always one to pitch in and help with the kids, I reckon, unless a man lives at the North Pole, when his wife goes."

But he hadn't been paying much attention to the problem, his manner indicated. He had pulled out a silver pencil and a brownish paper-bound notebook from his inner jacket pocket. He opened the notebook on his knee and unscrewed the pencil. John Bantreagh watched with dull, bloodshot eyes what he was writing.

" 'Mollie Bantreagh, Mrs. John Bantreagh, res. nr. Jeff-'ville. Struck on back of head by tire iron or other instr'm'nt & run onto by car's front wheels. Body found by husband —' "

He looked up with sharp alertness at John Bantreagh, with his pencil halted. Bantreagh swayed. He leaned back against his truck with his crank hanging from his hand. It was coming now—the question.

"What time did you find her, Mr. Bantreagh?"

John Bantreagh let his breath seep out. He stiffened

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his knees. It was bound to come. But this wasn't it yet.

"I haven't got a watch," he said tonelessly. "It was just getting kind of silver light. Maybe ten minutes ago. Maybe half an hour or three quarters—I don't know. It kind of knocked me out."

"I'll put it as four forty-five," said the young deputy sympathetically. "The exact time, I reckon, doesn't make any particular difference.

" 'Found by husband at four forty-five,' " he recited as he wrote. " 'Joined by Deputy Clade at five-oh-three and scene observed. No footprints. No tire tread discernible on body; smudge on nylon stockings indication possible print had been wiped off by hand. Possible tire tracks on field obliterated by husband's car and Deputy Clade's. Implement with which struck removed by killer. No other objects apparent on scene to indicate identity.' I guess that's the story, Mr. Bantreagh."

He put away his book and pencil. He pushed his hat off the back of his head and set it on levelly again, with his frowning gaze a moment on her staring eyes.

John Bantreagh swallowed. "They're nylons?" he said.

"What? Her stockings? Oh, sure. All the women've got to have them. What did you think they were?"

"I thought they were rayons," said John Bantreagh. "The pair I got for her last Christmas. I thought they were just rayons all the time. But then tonight I figured they were nylons."

"Oh, sure," the young deputy repeated mechanically. "All the women've got to have them."

He pushed his hat on the back of his head again and stood up.

"Who could have done it?" he repeated quietly, with his fists planted on his hips, looking down at John Bantreagh's pallid face and bloodshot eyes with his keen, alert gaze, with his fresh, keen brain behind it. "Who do you suppose could have done it, Mr. Bantreagh? I mean," he explained with frowning brow, "she couldn't have been murdered for her jewels and money, because I don't reckon she had any—more than just her wedding ring that she's still got on, and maybe a couple of nickels in her coin purse on her belt or something like that. It couldn't have been just a maniac, because how could he have got her out to a lonely place like this to murder her, without her putting up some sort of a fight and screaming?

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"It was some man she knew, who wanted to get rid of her. Because he was crazy about some beautiful little kid who was a few years younger than she was, maybe; and she knew about it, and was always nagging him, and stood in his way. And so he got her to ride out here with him, and he cracked her on the head with this tire iron or something that he had laid on the seat beside him handy, probably while he was making love to her, and then hauled her out and laid her down in front of his car, and ran his wheels up on her and crushed the life out of her. Figuring to drop her body in the ditch beside the road back near where she lived, like she had been struck by a hit-and-run while walking home.

"Only, after he had done it," the young deputy said, frowning at John Bantreagh, "he could see it wouldn't pass. The way her throat had been crushed would be only like she had been lying unconscious on the ground when she had been run over, just the way it had been done. There would be meadow mud and grass stains, maybe, on her dress. And maybe ten or a hundred other things that he couldn't think of at the moment, but that wouldn't let it pass. So it was murder," he said quietly, "and nothing else. And there was nothing for him to do but just leave her here, and go on home and go to sleep, like nothing had happened, waiting till somebody else happened to find her. Figuring that it wouldn't be for some hours yet, at least. And maybe days, because it was such a lonely road. Though hoping, too, that it wouldn't be too long.

"And so, as I figure it, Mr. Bantreagh, he got up quietly from where he was kneeling beside her, when he was sure she was dead, and backed away from her to get into his car again, that he had rolled back off her, and back it down across the meadow to the road again. Figuring that if he had left any tire tracks a few hours more might dim them out. Or that maybe somebody else had tires like his, or that maybe when somebody else would come along, they would roll over them with their own tracks before they had noticed them.

"Now, there's just one thing that I've got to ask you, Mr. Bantreagh."

A faint dawn breath across the dewed meadow stirred a drape of his crisp, freshly pressed black jacket as he stood looking down at John Bantreagh. It stirred the ends of the black knit four-in-hand on his expanse of white shirt above his

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flat, quiet-breathing diaphragm. The skin on his hard, young, fresh-shaven face was shiny and tight, and a little muscle rippled at the corner of his mouth, though John Bantreagh's eyes did not lift that high.

His knees—John Bantreagh's—caved, and he stiffened them. He leaned back against the windshield post of his truck, thrusting his heels against the ground. His bloodshot eyes swam, out of focus. He fingered his throat with his left hand, glancing involuntarily down. There was a deep scratch or cut across the back of his right hand, he saw, that was gripped about the crank handle. He didn't remember when he had got it, but it was still oozing. Some of the blood must have seeped stickily around onto his clenched palm, helping to glue it to the iron.

Now! he thought. What form the question would take, he didn't know. But it must come. The throat muscles of the big young deputy were still moving beneath his broad, smooth-shaven chin. He had paused only for a moment.

"Just one question, Mr. Bantreagh," he repeated. "It may seem kind of cold and brutal of me to ask it, at a time like this," he added, a little awkwardly. "But if I didn't, someone else would, anyway. And they still will, I reckon, and keep on asking it until they've found out whatever there is to know. You understand, a law officer's got his job to do, and it's just impersonal. What I mean is, Mr. Bantreagh, was there anybody that she had been going around with that you ever heard about? A boy friend that she had, I mean—someone that she had been two-timing you with? Of course," he added, "she might have been stepping out and you not have known anything about it. That happens, too. But there must have been someone, just on the face of it, because he would have been the only man in the world who would have any cause to have done it, as sure as hell. Did she ever drop any hint to you about him, Mr. Bantreagh, as to who he was? I don't mean to seem cold and brutal at a time like this."

John Bantreagh swallowed. "I know you've got to ask your questions," he said, pulling at the loose skin of his throat. "That's all right. Yes, I reckon there was"—he swallowed—"someone. She used to go down to the village two or three times a week after supper; it's only a couple of miles away. She'd tell me she was going to the library to read magazines and books. She was always a great hand for reading. I couldn't drive her in

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the truck, because somebody had to stay home with the kids. I'd be asleep by the time she got home. But it seems she didn't really go to the library at all. This fellow would pick her up on the road, and they'd go riding in his car. I only learned about it last night."

He swallowed again. He rubbed his forehead with his left hand. There was some small thing he was trying to remember. But there was much more that he wanted to forget.

"I woke up," he said tonelessly, "with one of the kids crying. He was cold, and wanted a blanket on him. Mollie always looked to their covers when she came home or got up in the night herself. But she hadn't got home yet. By the looks of the moonlight out on the yard it looked kind of late. I held the alarm clock to the window and saw it was one o'clock. I lit the lamp and put on my pants and shoes and went out to the road in front and looked down it, but didn't see her coming. There was something white on the front porch of the Turner house a quarter mile down, but that was all.

"So I went back in and covered the kids up better, tucking them in. They sure looked cute in their new pajamas, and I wished she was there to see them. I'd got pajamas for them with my tire order that had come in the morning, blue and white stripes for the boys, and the baby's pink with white ducks on them. She hadn't seen them in them yet; she'd gone out right after supper, before I'd got them to bed. That made me think"—John Bantreagh swallowed—"of the nylons. Her birthday was tomorrow—today. Twenty-nine. And I had ordered her a pair of nylons. I figured she would like them. She had never had any. "I had left them out in the truck in back, under the seat, to get and give her in the morning. But I thought it might be kind of nice to put them in her bottom drawer for her, where she kept her things, and kind of say something to her in the morning, joking like, that I had heard a mouse in her drawer last night, maybe it was making a nest. And she would hurry to open it and pull out all her things, and would find them at the bottom, and it would surprise her.

"So I brought them in in their envelope," said John Bantreagh tonelessly, "and opened her drawer and took out some of her things on top, the socks she generally wears and her blouses and skirts that she had made and a couple of starched house dresses. She

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kept her rayons in the drawer, I knew. But she was wearing them, I thought. I didn't know she had any other stockings." He swallowed. "But there were lots of stockings there, hid away at the bottom. A dozen pairs of them. They were the same color as her rayons, but they were smooth and slick. They had the feel of the nylons I had bought her now. And there were underthings—pink things, silk and nylon things, things with lace on them. There was even a set of black-lace step-ins and bras. They were what she had been wringing out, or others like them, when I'd been putting on my new tires that forenoon, in a little squeezed-up handful before my eyes. I don't know what there is about black-lace things. They're not what a woman gets for herself. They make it seem more awful, somehow.

"I was kind of upwrought." John Bantreagh swallowed. "There was a pint out in the kitchen cupboard that her sister's husband had given me last summer when they visited, only I'm not much of a drinking man. But I got it down and took some now. I thought I'd better go and find her. I put on a shirt and coat, and put the matches up on the kitchen shelf where the kids couldn't reach them, and put out the lamp. I went out to crank the truck. I had just picked up the crank, when I looked around, and thought I saw her on the back porch behind me, in the moonlight and the vines. Only it wasn't her. It wasn't anything. It was just the moonlight moving."

John Bantreagh pulled at his throat. "I cranked the truck then," he went on, "and got in it, and went down the road towards the village. On the Turner porch steps, just off the road, there was something white sitting. It was Lilybelle, sitting in the moonlight in her nightdress with her arms about her knees. 'Hello, Mr. Bantreagh!' she called out to me, kind of low. 'Where are you going at this time of night? What's happened to Mrs. Bantreagh?'

"I stopped." John Bantreagh swallowed. "I didn't want any gossip started. 'What do you mean, what's happened to her?' I said.

" 'I woke up and came out on the steps a little while ago,' she said. 'The moonlight was so pretty. And I looked up the road and thought I saw somebody going into your house, like she had just got home.'

" 'No,' I told her. 'It must have been me. Mollie's been home since ten o'clock.' Not

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wanting to start any gossip.

"'I love the moonlight,' Lilybelle said. 'It's so quiet and so mysterious. I saw a lamp lit in your house, and then put out again. I heard your back screen door slam and thought I heard you say something like, "What have you been doing, Mollie?" kind of sharp and mad. Then I could hear you cranking your car. I wondered if maybe she wasn't feeling well, and you were going for the doctor.'

"'No,' I told her. 'I guess for a minute I thought maybe she had come out on the back porch behind me. But it wasn't her. It was just the vines moving in the moonlight. I just thought I'd take a ride to set my new tires right.'

"Then—I don't know why—but she looked so kind of pretty, with her dark curls and her big eyes, and the moonlight silver on her nightdress and her bare feet, and I had the nylons on the seat beside me, that I'd brought back out to the truck again, without knowing it; and I said to her, 'Would you like a pair of nylons, Lilybelle?' And she got up and came out to the truck, and stood up on the running board beside me and opened them.

"'My!' she said. 'You sure know your way around, Mr. Bantreagh! What is it a bribe for? Have you murdered Mrs. Bantreagh, and you want me to keep it quiet?'"

John Bantreagh swallowed.

"Laughing," he said. "Just joking. She didn't have any idea that she was dead, of course. And she looked in the back of my truck, where I've got those old burlaps, and she said to me, 'Why, you did! You have! And you've got her body in there now, Mr. Bantreagh!'

"'That's right,' I told her. 'No sense in trying to fool you. I hit her over the head with my truck crank because she'd been nagging me about you, Lilybelle. Now the deck's all clear for you and me. What'll it be—Niagara Falls?'

"Wanting to just take it along in stride with her. Just joking, like a fellow does with a girl when she's pretty."

The young deputy, competent and cool, looked at him with alert and steady eyes, as gray as the dawn.

"For Pete's sake," he said, "is that all, Mr. Bantreagh? I thought you might know something about this fellow she had been stepping out with. But you don't even know for sure that there was anybody. She might have bought her stockings and lingerie stuff herself, with some grocery money that she had held out on you. Here she is dead. Somebody killed her. But all you can tell about is

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how you covered up your kids and the new pajamas they were wearing and thinking for a minute you saw her on the back porch when you were starting to crank your truck, only it was just the vine leaves and moonlight, and then some kidding conversation you had with this Lilybelle babe, to keep her from starting any gossip. But how is that telling anything about who killed her?" He shook his head with an exhalation of his flat diaphragm. "If it wasn't murder I could almost laugh," he said. "Maybe she didn't have any boy friend. Maybe nobody killed her."

"Oh, yes, she did," said John Bantreagh. "Oh, yes, he killed her. I drove on into the village after leaving Lilybelle. Everything was all dark and shut up, except the Waldorf All-Nite lunch wagon on the square across from the library. I went in there and the counterman was behind the counter, and a truck driver or somebody eating a piece of pie. I asked what time the library had closed tonight. And the counterman said it had closed at five o'clock; it wasn't ever open at night.

"I said to him, had he seen a lady in a white dress with big red polka dots on it, and white shoes, with light-brown wavy hair and hazel eyes, and plucked eyebrows and a red mouth, about twenty-nine? And he said there was a lady like that who sometimes came in between eleven and midnight and got sandwiches or things like that and took them out to her boy friend in their car, but she hadn't been in tonight. It was almost two o'clock now, he said, and so she probably wouldn't be in now.

"Then the truck driver spoke up and asked me if she lived on Jaybird Road and if she hung around the Swamp Run culvert bridge in the evenings, about half a mile out of town. I said yes, I reckoned she lived somewhere up that way. He said that he had seen her half a dozen times when he was going along Jaybird Road, sitting on the abutment of the culvert bridge in the evenings, like she was waiting for someone. And he had given her his horn and the high sign, only he was generally in a hurry, and there were babes like her along every road, and he could have all of them he wanted. But one time last month, he said, he had come coasting towards the culvert bridge with his engine off—there's a grade down before it, and he was a little low on gas—and he saw her sitting there, not knowing anyone was near. She was stretching out her

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nylon legs and tightening up her garters to some black-lace things she had on. And she had looked up just as his truck rolled to her and had smiled at him.

"It had driven him kind of wild," said John Bantreagh tiredly. "He had stopped his truck and jumped out to grab her. Just then he had looked around, and there was a car that was stopping at the side of the road, just off the culvert bridge, about twenty feet away in the shadows under the trees. There was some man in it, looking at him. He had let go of her and had jumped back into his truck again and driven off.

" 'What are you looking for her for?' he said to me. 'Are you trying to make her yourself? Brother, if I was you, I wouldn't! I'm big and plenty tough myself, and I'm not scared of anything. But there was something about that guy. . . . Your wife?' he said—I guess I must have said something—'If she was my wife, with those black-lace things and that smile she had, I'd kill her!'

"So I knew." John Bantreagh swallowed. "But I had known when I found those nylons and things. I reckon I had kind of known all along, if I had thought about it. I drove around looking for her," he said tonelessly. "Along every road I came to. It was just breaking dawn when I came along the back road here. I saw something white off in the meadow and I drove in through the break in the fence and found her. It kind of knocked me out."

The breath of dawn air across the silvered grass stirred the ends of the young deputy's black knit tie on his expanse of snow-white shirt. He stood motionless with fists on hips. There was nothing else stirring about his hard towering figure or about the world. Only John Bantreagh's knees, which caved and caved.

No, his knees weren't caving any more. It was just a lingering of ceased sensation.

"Who was he?" the calm, alert voice of Deputy Roy Clade came to him. "I guess this counterman and this truck driver wouldn't know. But what did he look like? Did they say?"

"They didn't get a look at him," said John Bantreagh. "When she had come into the Waldorf he had always stayed in his car across the street, with his lights out in the blackness under the trees around the square. The truck-driving fellow didn't see what he looked like, either. He just got scared and jumped in his truck and drove away."

"Cagey," commented Roy

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Clade. "He was taking care that nobody saw him with her, if he ever had to get rid of her like he did. Maybe he knew from his experience that these married ones are hard to ditch. What kind of a car did he have, did they say?"

"They didn't know the make," said Bantreagh. "It was just a black sedan."

"Nine cars out of ten—" said Roy Clade, "nine out of ten are black sedans. I've got one myself. There's nothing in that, unless they got his license number. And they wouldn't have, if he was that cagey. He would have had his plates muddied over."

"No, they didn't get his license number," said Bantreagh. "Nobody ever did, I reckon, that saw her with him. He was cagey, like you say."

The big young deputy shook his head. "It's not any good, I'm afraid, Mr. Bantreagh," he said. "Nobody knows who he is, where he lives, what he looks like, the number of his car license, or anything. Just this counterman and this truck driver who knew that she had been stepping out with some man that had a car, and maybe two or three more people here or around who may have seen her getting into it with him from a distance when it was getting dark, or getting out of it below the place next to yours when he brought her home. He was awful cagey. He did it, all right, I reckon. But he'll get away with it, as sometimes happens. I'm awfully sorry, Mr. Bantreagh, but I'm afraid the police have been left with nothing to go on at all."

John Bantreagh rubbed his forehead. So much—so much to forget. That he would try to forget. That he must keep from the kids forever. So much to forget, even of bright and tender things, of when he had been younger and she had been so very young, no older than Lilybelle, and all the world had been pink-colored and full of joy.

He had known that he could never give her all she wanted. It hadn't been her fault that it had come to this. It had been his. If he had only been a little smarter. Though it could not be mended now. So much to forget, of shame and grief and failure. But some small, trivial thing to remember. And now he had remembered it.

"Nothing to go on, except what she told me," he said.

"What she told you?" said Deputy Roy Clade. "I thought you said that she had never told you anything. That you never knew a thing about it or had the least suspicion until last night."

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He stood motionless. His eyes were gray as the dawn. John Bantreagh lifted his blurred bloodshot gaze and met Roy Clade's gray eyes.

"What she told me after I had found her," said John Bantreagh. "Just before she died."

"You mean—" said Roy Clade, with the muscles moving on his face. "You mean that she was still alive? You mean that she told you? Why, you're crazy, you damn apple-knocking liar! She's been dead since one o'clock!"

His right fist jerked from his hip. He jerked it upward against his shoulder, with a contorted look on his face and his mouth opening in a scream.

John Bantreagh had got his right arm in motion. He had swung it, stepping in on knees swift and wiry, no longer caving, cracking the truck crank across the bones of Roy Clade's thick, strong wrist as the young deputy's fist left his hip. With his wrist against his shoulder Roy Clade screamed.

John Bantreagh snapped his left hand forward, grabbed the gun out of its holster, dropped his crank, side-stepping. He had the gun in his right hand now, and the hammer back.

"Both hands out from your shoulders!" he said. "No use to yell at me and damn me! Heel! You know what this is. You know how it shoots. Heel, and swing your arms slowly back behind you till I have got your handcuffs on!

"Maybe she didn't tell me," he said, with a dry gasp in his throat. "But you did! Here I was beside her body, with blood on my hand, with the crank that might have been the thing that knocked her out, with my truck tracks leading right up to her, and no other tracks but them on the field! Here I was, her husband, the first man in the world to be suspicioned, even if there was nothing to show that I had ever been around here at all!

"Here I was, that had drunk whiskey tonight, that had given a pair of nylons to Lilybelle after she was dead! That had told Lilybelle I had killed her and had her body in my truck! That had gone in and talked to the counterman and the truck driver kind of wild, and maybe said that I would kill her when I found her—I don't know. A man gets to talking wild when he thinks of his wife and those black-lace things, and his man's pride.

"Here I was, with everything saying it was me! Why, my best friends would have thought sure I'd done it! They would have figured some reason why—Lilybelle, or some argument we'd

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had about the kids, or about some fellow that she'd been stepping out with—wouldn't make any difference who. They would all have said that I had done it. At the least you might have asked me if I had. But you knew I hadn't done it. Only the man who had killed her himself, in all this world, would know that! No need to swear at me. Hold your hands behind you! You know what this is against your back.

"It took me a long time to figure out," said John Bantreagh tiredly. "I was knocked out. Just like a dummy. But I told you what her name was and you pretended never to have heard it before. I didn't tell you how to spell it, though—I didn't think that you might write it down. Everybody who just hears it thinks it's spelled *t-r-y*, like 'pantry.' I always have a lot of trouble getting it spelled right. Thought sometimes of changing it myself. But you spelled it right without being told, when you wrote it down in your notebook. I've been trying to think how you knew, ever since you did.

"And other things you didn't think of, I reckon! You've got that tire iron in your car's tool kit or in your garage at home—you must still have it, you've mentioned it so often. And even if you've washed it with soap and water or kerosene there will still be blood in the pores of the iron, that will show in some of these machines that they have these days, I reckon that you know. There will be blood on your car cushions. Maybe on the shirt and suit you wore last night.

"And you went home and slept," John Bantreagh said, "while I was out looking on every road for her all night! And got up and took a bath and shaved and rubbed yourself with sweet-smelling shaving lotion and put on a clean white shirt and your crisp black suit and your black knit tie, and came on back here to park just inside the woods' edge off the road, to wait for her to be discovered. Only I was already here when you came.

"There'll be the blood! There's her name, that you knew how to spell. And somewhere—yes, somewhere, when they get to looking, no matter how careful and cagey you tried to be—there will be someone that has seen you and her together, when they go looking into it, and can tie you up in an iron way.

"Get into the back of your car! No need to blaspheme me. Kneel on the floor! I'm going to have to put some of my truck lashings around you. You're

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powerful, and your brain is fresh and new-slept and smart. But I don't think you're going to get away. I'll try to get you to the doctor as quick as I can. I'm sorry I had to hit so hard.

"Kneel on the floor, and pray!" John Bantreagh said. "I wouldn't have ever known who you were. Nobody would have ever known about you, with nothing to start them looking into you. They would have put it on me, her husband, caught with her, caught red-handed, caught with motive, and I'd have got twenty years or life. And what would have happened to the kids is more than I can bear to think. The fear of it made my knees cave. It made me so blind that I could hardly see. If you had asked me whether I had done it I would have fallen dead away. But it won't be that way. You told me."

John Bantreagh looked at that still form lying in front of his truck wheels, with her staring eyes. "Perhaps," he said, "she helped."

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a *NEW* Francis Quarles story by

JULIAN SYMONS

first publication in the United States

The invitation to Francis Quarles, private inquiry agent, was a curious one: "Come and watch the poisoner at work." But the real baffler in the case proved to be somewhat different: just how had the poison been administered?

PRESERVING THE EVIDENCE

by JULIAN SYMONS

"The plain fact is my wife's trying to kill me." Herbert Watling, managing director of the Watling Tool Company, put his hands on his knees and looked almost angrily at Francis Quarles. He was a long-nosed, self-important carroty man of about fifty. "Poison," he added.

The detective stared thoughtfully across his big desk. "How do you know?"

Watling patted his stomach. "Haven't been feeling myself lately—stomach cramps, sickness after meals. She's putting stuff in my food."

"Have you seen a doctor? You may have a stomach ulcer."

"Don't believe in doctors, they're all quacks. But this is no stomach ulcer—she's trying to poison me I tell you."

"Allowing that what you say is true, and that there is poison involved, why should you think it's your wife? You've told me there are other people living in the house—your sister Edith, your son Edward, the cook Mary. Why shouldn't it be one of them?"

Watling's gaze shifted uneasily. "It's Bella all right. She'd be the one to profit by it. Besides, she's hated me for years."

"Why?"

Watling embarked on a rambling recital of petty disagreements. Obviously he was not telling the whole truth, yet

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it seemed to Quarles that the man was genuinely worried. Finally the detective agreed to come down on the following day to investigate the situation, posing as a business associate of Watling's. "In the meantime you'd better be careful what you eat and drink."

Watling smiled grimly. "Believe me, I watch what she eats at meals before I touch anything myself."

An hour after Watling had gone, Quarles's secretary came in and said that Mrs. Watling was outside. Quarles raised his eyebrows. "Show her in."

Bella Watling was a small, blonde, determined woman who had once been pretty. She came to the point at once. "Mr. Quarles, I've been having my husband followed and I know he's been to see you. What has he been saying? That I'm trying to poison him, I expect."

"If he said that, would it be true?" Quarles asked politely.

She snorted. "He's always had bad indigestion and it's been worse than usual these last few weeks, that's all. He doesn't believe a word of it himself. He simply wants to get rid of me."

"To poison you, do you mean?"

"No. He's covering up his own guilty conscience. Oh, Mr. Quarles, if you knew the life I've lived with that man." She poured into Quarles's ear a long tale of her husband's constant and varied infidelities. "Now he's after somebody fresh. I can always tell. But this time I'm going to get a divorce when they've found out who it is. I'm having a watch kept on him from the time he leaves home in the morning till he comes back at night."

"And what have you found out?"

"Nothing yet. My husband's a clever devil. He knows I mean business this time and he doesn't want his home broken up. He's fond of Edward, I will say that for him. All this nonsense about being poisoned just means that he's going to make things as awkward as he can for me."

Quarles considered. "I was supposed to come down tomorrow as a business associate of your husband's, but—"

"Oh, come down by all means," she said with rather dreadful gaiety. "Come and watch the poisoner at work."

But Quarles did not get down to the Watlings' house at Porlow in Buckinghamshire in time for that. At ten o'clock on the following morning he heard the gritty voice of his friend Inspector Leeds on the telephone. "Quarles? Did a man named Watling come and see you yesterday—and his wife,

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too? Man claimed she was poisoning him? Well, looks as if he might not have been far wrong. At any rate, he's dead."

"Nearly two grains of arsenic in the organs. He died of acute arsenical poisoning. Lost a bit of time because the doctor was out on an emergency, but it didn't make any difference. They did what they could for him, poor beggar. And one of them did *for* him, no doubt about that." The Inspector paused. "The wife bought an arsenical insecticide a couple of weeks ago. Got a widower named Jenkins who lives in a cottage on the grounds with his daughter and who looks after the garden. She says Jenkins told her it was needed. He can't be sure but thinks she mentioned it to him. Anyway, we found it in the dustbin empty. What did they tell you?"

Quarles recounted the interviews. The Inspector grunted. "Doesn't look good for her."

"No." There was hesitation in Quarles's voice. "She behaved very stupidly if she did do it, coming to me just before killing him."

"That's how we catch criminals, through their stupidities. She may have thought it was a good bluff. Only puzzle is, how the poison was given to him."

And that remained a puzzle. Quarles talked to Bella Watling, to the son Edward who was a boy of fifteen, to the dead man's sister Edith, a gaunt spinster who made no secret of the fact that she believed Bella had poisoned her husband, and to the cook Mary.

It was Mary who had prepared the evening meal of roast lamb with mint sauce, baked potatoes, and runner beans, followed by plum pie, that had been eaten by everybody. The food had been served in the dining room by Bella. Watling had drunk with the meal the best part of a bottle of wine which he opened himself, and this had made him rather excited and quarrelsome. Bella Watling and Edith had drunk one small glass each of the wine.

Watling was extremely fond of fruit, both cooked and raw, and he had had two large helpings of plum pie, but then the others had eaten the pie in smaller quantities with no bad effects. He was a nonsmoker and had not taken any medicine. There was no glass or bottle by his bedside.

At about eleven o'clock the household had gone to bed, Watling and his wife to separate rooms. Half an hour later Edith Watling had heard somebody go downstairs and come up again

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almost immediately. Presumably this was Watling, since nobody else admitted to going downstairs. At about half-past twelve Bella Watling was awakened by groans coming from her husband's room. Five hours later he was dead.

How, then, had the poison been administered? Inspector Leeds scratched his gray head and admitted himself baffled. He was certain that it had been given to Watling at some point during the meal, and impressed this on the men who were searching every room in the house.

Quarles roamed about, poking in corners and opening closets and cupboards without quite knowing what he was looking for, or where he expected to find it. He unscrewed the jars and bottles on Bella Watling's dressing table and investigated the patent-medicine bottles lining the cabinet in the bathroom. He examined Watling's toothpaste and shaving cream, and searched the dead man's bedroom carefully. In the wastepaper basket of the bedroom he found a small object which he picked up carefully and put into an envelope, putting the envelope into his pocket.

Downstairs again Quarles discovered that the wastepaper baskets were cleared every day before lunchtime. Then he wandered about the dining room, watched apprehensively by Bella Watling. He stood looking out of the French window. "A beautiful garden," he said appreciatively. "You grow all your own fruit, I suppose. These, for instance." He touched a bowl on the dining table containing apples and pears.

"Yes, Jenkins picks them fresh every day and brings them in."

"Don't I see peaches, too, sheltering under that red-brick wall?"

"Yes. Not very many, though. They were all kept for Herbert because he was so fond of them."

"Very proper. Come and look at the garden, Inspector. I know you love flowers." The Inspector stared incredulously, but allowed himself to be led out to the terrace. Quarles showed him what he had found in the wastepaper basket. "Your man must have missed it, or didn't attach any importance to it."

"I'll speak to him," the Inspector said grimly.

"Oh, come now, it's hardly what you told them to expect. Let's go and find Jenkins."

They did not find him, but in the vegetable garden a girl was bending over a row of

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runner beans. Quarles stopped. "Ah, you'll be Jenkins' daughter."

She straightened up, a dark handsome girl with eyes red-rimmed from recent weeping. "Yes."

"A sad thing, isn't it, about Mr. Watling's death? Or don't you agree? Would you say he was a harsh employer or a kind one? Were you happy here?"

She put a hand to her throat and said in a choked voice, "He was—I don't know what you mean."

"I think you do. He told you he was in love with you, didn't he?"

Her face went pink. She dropped the basket in her hand and ran. A voice at Quarles's elbow said, "Let the girl alone." He turned to face a grizzled man with a spade.

"You're her father. She was in love with Watling." The gardener said nothing. "It had to be someone round here, because Mrs. Watling had a watch kept on him at other times, and found nothing."

"She's a good girl," Jenkins said fiercely.

"But she wouldn't have stayed good for long with Watling making a play for her. That's why you killed him."

The grizzled man stared hard at Quarles. "I don't know what you mean."

"I think you do. Watling thought he was being poisoned, and he assumed his wife was doing the poisoning. Inspector Leeds thought so, too, until I found a small piece of evidence that made him change his mind. But in fact it was you who suggested to Mrs. Watling that she should buy some insecticide. Then you experimented with small doses that made Watling feel ill. Yesterday you increased the dose to a fatal one."

"Prove it," said Jenkins.

"Watling died of something he ate or drank last night. What was it? At dinner everything he ate and drank was taken by other people, too. But after he went to bed he came downstairs, took from the dish of fruit one of the peaches that were always kept for him, and ate it. You knew that you were safe enough in poisoning the peaches, because nobody else ate them. Watling didn't suspect them because he was convinced that his wife was poisoning his cooked food."

"Prove it," the gardener said. "Prove that he ate a peach."

"Unfortunately for you we can," Quarles said. "You see, Watling preserved the evidence." And he held up the peach stone that Watling had thrown into the wastepaper basket.

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a *NEW* Nick Velvet by

EDWARD D. HOCH

This is the 12th story in the series about Nick Velvet, today's heir apparent to the crown variously worn by, among others, Grant Allen's Colonel Clay (1897), E. W. Hornung's Raffles (1899), Frederick Irving Anderson's The Infallible Godahl (1914) and The Notorious Sophie Lang (1925), Edgar Wallace's Four Square Jane (1929), and Roy Vickers' Fidelity Dove (1935).

Nick is a choosy crook. As he himself says, he "never steals money or jewels or anything of intrinsic value." So when a client asked Nick to steal a leather coffin—a leather coffin!—even Nick was more interested than usual. And when the client offered to double Nick's $20,000 fee—well, Nick found the assignment irresistible.

Once again Nick has to demonstrate his detective prowess in order to succeed as a thief—in the golden tradition of Maurice Leblanc's Arsene Lupin (1907), the greatest thief-'tec of them all . . .

THE THEFT OF THE LEATHER COFFIN

by EDWARD D. HOCH

"Just how fast could you do a job for me?" the man in the cowboy hat asked.

Nick Velvet leaned back in his chair, scenting money. Poor men didn't come to New York wearing $400 suits, polished boots, and cowboy hats. "Well," he began slowly, feeling his way, "I don't usually take more than a few days. But of course it depends on what you want stolen. As you know, I never steal money or jewels or anything of intrinsic value."

The man in the cowboy hat, whose name was Rufus Green, asked, "What about a coffin?"

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"A coffin with a body in it?"

"As it happens, yes. But the body isn't important. I want the coffin, and I want it before the burial on Friday."

"You know my fee?" Nick asked. They were seated close to each other in the lobby of a mid-Manhattan hotel, sheltered by a drooping palm.

Green waved a hand, dismissing his question. "Money is no object. Your fee is $20,000? I'll double it if you get me that coffin."

"Just where is it now?"

"At the Grande Funeral Parlor, in a Texas border town called Santa Maria."

"I'll find it," Nick said. He glanced up to see a pasty-faced blond-haired man limping by, and he wondered if their conversation might have been overheard. "Will I have any trouble identifying the coffin?"

"It's the only one like it I've ever seen or heard of. Chase Dalton, a big Texas cattleman, died in an accident yesterday. He had the coffin specially built for him last year. The outside is covered with leather. He used to tell people he'd spent most of his life in the saddle and he was going to ride to heaven in a leather coffin."

Nick Velvet nodded. He knew the ways of some Texas millionaires, though he did not always understand them. "This is Wednesday. You say the funeral is Friday?"

"Friday morning. That doesn't give you much time."

"Don't worry," Nick assured him. They shook hands and Rufus Green moved away across the lobby. Nick noticed the blond-haired man following Green out the door.

The death of Chase Dalton was a big event in Santa Maria. When Nick reached the Grande Funeral Parlor the next day in the rented car that was waiting for him at the nearest airport, the highway was already crowded with vehicles—most of them Cadillacs, Imperials, and Continentals. There were men in broad-brimmed cowboy hats everywhere, mostly with wives who were a good deal younger and more attractive.

Nick parked as close as he could and walked the rest of the way to the front door. The autumn landscape in this part of Texas was flat and barren—miles of grazing land broken only by an occasional clutter of oil wells. Even from the plane it had looked like money country, and the mourners reflected the affluence of the area. It wouldn't be an easy job getting the coffin away from them, but Nick had the beginnings of a plan. It involved a misdirecting

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of the funeral procession on its way to church the following morning, and he thought it could be done.

"Are you a friend of the family?" a girl's voice asked as he stepped through the door. The question snapped him out of his meditations, and he saw a sandy-haired young woman in her early twenties. The deep healthy tan of her face and arms contrasted sharply with the formal black of her dress.

"Not really," Nick told her. "I knew Chase Dalton years ago. I was passing through when I heard the news. How did it happen?"

"I'm Rima Dalton, his niece, Mr.—?"

"Velvet."

"Mr. Velvet. It was a terrible accident, really. He had a heart attack or something while out on the range. He fell off his horse right in the path of some stampeding cattle." She led Nick into the flower-filled room where her uncle's closed coffin rested, surrounded by the hushed mourners.

A framed color photograph of Chase Dalton on his horse stood on top of the coffin. It showed a weather-beaten, white-haired man whose features were still youthful. Nick thought he had seen the face before, perhaps in a newspaper or magazine. Then his eyes dropped to the coffin itself, a large shining leather-covered container such as he'd never seen before. "That's quite a coffin," he observed.

"He had it specially made last year. It's bronze, with a cowhide covering."

"Then he had a premonition of death?"

She hesitated. "I don't think so, not after all he'd been through. He was thrown by a horse when he was a boy and it left one leg shorter than the other. No, I think he had the coffin made because of Harv, his only son. The boy died in a plane crash last year, and that got his father thinking." A slim graying woman in black appeared at her side and Rima Dalton hastened to introduce her. "Mr. Velvet, this is my Aunt Gilda, Chase's widow."

"So pleased you could come," Gilda Dalton murmured routinely.

Nick muttered some suitable condolences. "It was a terrible tragedy," he was saying when suddenly he was aware that the widow's eyes had darted to the entrance. A dark-haired young man had appeared in the doorway, holding a .45 automatic in his hand, looking as if he knew how to use it. He pushed one man roughly aside and took up a position covering the entire room. Behind him was a

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second man, a Mexican, with an Army M-16 rifle.

"Nobody move!" the man with the automatic ordered. A woman screamed and Nick saw more than one hand start for a weapon. But the gunmen were quick and serious. One white-haired mourner who started forward to challenge them got a poke in the stomach from the Mexican's rifle. "I said nobody move!" the dark-haired man repeated. "We don't want to hurt you!"

Nick felt Gilda Dalton sag heavily on his arm as he started forward himself. Helpless while holding Mrs. Dalton up, it still took him another moment to realize what was happening. Then, almost at once, four more burly Mexicans appeared, heading straight for the closed coffin. They brushed away the framed photograph and the flowers, and carefully lifted the coffin from its stand.

The man with the automatic took a few steps backward, still covering the mourners as he guided the coffin through the doorway. It was then that Nick tried to move again, seeing his $40,000 fee going out the door, but the widow collapsed in his arms and he could do nothing.

The Mexican with the rifle backed away, following the others, until he reached the doorway. "I must hold you here for five minutes," he told them. "Do not move."

"What's the meaning of this outrage?" the white-haired man demanded. "Do you want money or what?"

The Mexican simply grinned. "We have what we want." He kept the rifle pointed toward the middle of the group, ready to swing in either direction.

Nick helped Mrs. Dalton steady herself, aware that nothing like this had ever happened to him before. Someone else had beaten him to his prize. He eyed the gunman, looking for an opening, but he could see none. After about five minutes the Mexican glanced at his watch and backed out the door, still covering them. He glanced nervously over his shoulder, as if fearful of the arrival of other mourners, and then was quickly gone. The instant he disappeared through the door, a dozen in the room leaped into action. One ran to call the police, while Nick and the white-haired man sprinted for the door.

"He's at his car," Nick pointed.

"I'll handle him," the man said gruffly. He flipped back his jacket and drew a pearl-handled revolver. The Mexican must have seen the glint of the weapon in the sunlight, because

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he turned to bring the rifle to his shoulder. The man at Nick's side never hesitated. He fired twice, dropping the Mexican in his tracks.

"I think you killed him," Nick shouted, running forward.

"Damn right! That's just what I meant to do!"

In the middle of the confusion Rima Dalton appeared at Nick's side. She had apparently sought him out, and she confided, "My aunt is prostrated. Who'd do such a terrible thing?"

"There's a Mexican license plate on the station wagon the dead man was driving. Your uncle have any enemies in Mexico?"

"Not that I know of," she answered, looking away. "He owned property there, though."

"Who's the sharpshooter?" Nick asked, nodding to the white-haired man who was now talking to the police.

"Greg Bentley, an old friend of the family. He and my uncle and a third man were partners in a land-development company."

"Does he always carry a gun?"

"Many people do, in Texas. You must be from the east."

Nick smiled. "I am." The police were busy on their car radios, sending out an alarm for the stolen coffin, but Nick was quite sure they wouldn't get it back that easily. Five minutes was time enough for the thieves to reach the Mexican border, just down the highway, and the guards would probably let a coffin pass without much trouble, especially if it was in a hearse. He glanced inside the car the Mexican had been driving. "Station wagons are good for smuggling narcotics, behind these body panels."

Rima frowned and glanced about, as if fearful of being overheard. "What made you mention narcotics?"

Nick pointed through the car window at a boxlike metal contraption. "That could be a crude marijuana press. Mexican dealers usually sell the stuff in brick form."

She grabbed his arm and led him away. "You're smart, Mr. Velvet. Are you a detective?"

"Hardly. But I'm sure the cops will recognize that press when they search the car."

"But you know about the Mexican marijuana fields?"

"A little," Nick admitted. He'd once done a job for a man in Florida who had contacts there.

Rima Dalton's eyes sought his. "I don't really know who you are, Mr. Velvet, but I think I can trust you. I want you to help me get that coffin back,

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before this kills my aunt."

"I'd certainly like to get it back," Nick admitted.

"Come on, I have a car. There are too many police around here."

She drove a little red sports car with a fury Nick had already come to expect on Texas highways, her sandy hair blowing out behind her. After he'd settled down to the unnerving thrill of her driving he asked, "You don't like cops much, do you?"

"I've no reason to. When Harv—that was Chase and Gilda's son—died in the plane crash last year, the police hounded us day and night."

"They must have had a reason."

"Harv crashed the family's private plane in the Mexican Sierras. The police found fertilizer, plastic hose, shovels, and hoes in the wreckage, and they suspected he was running supplies to a hidden marijuana field."

"Was he?" Nick asked.

For a long time she didn't answer. Finally she said, "Whatever he was doing, his death was a terrible blow to Uncle Chase. It was after the funeral that he had the leather coffin built and had a falling-out with Greg Bentley and some others."

"Interesting," Nick murmured. "Is there a good hotel anywhere around here?"

She glanced sideways at him. "You're going to stay?"

"I gathered you wanted to talk about a marijuana field."

She hesitated again. "I do and I don't. I want to trust you. I want to trust somebody!"

"I'm not a cop, and I like them about as much as you do. I have to pick up my car and then I'll be staying in a motel overnight. Think about it, and if you want to we'll talk some more in the morning."

That seemed to satisfy her. "All right. Stay at the Tex-Mex Motel, near the border. I'll see you in the morning."

The Tex-Mex was a small place, set well back from the highway behind a big neon sign showing a cowboy and a sombreroed Mexican. Nick was just settling down for the evening when there was a soft knocking on his door. He opened it and saw the white-haired man, Greg Bentley, standing there. "You're Velvet, right?"

"That's my name," Nick admitted.

"Remember me? From the funeral parlor? Greg Bentley."

"I could hardly forget. You're quite a shot."

"I'd like to talk with you," he said, stepping inside.

Nick closed the door and

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motioned toward a chair. "What's on your mind?"

Bentley was a man who came right to the point. "You're a stranger in town, Mr. Velvet. I knew Chase Dalton all his life and I never heard him mention your name. The police are questioning strangers, so I thought I might help them by talking to you."

"That gun almost makes you a sheriff, doesn't it?"

Bentley rested one hand on the pearl-handled butt protruding from beneath his coat. "It almost does," he agreed with a hard smile. "Now just who are you, Mr. Velvet, and why did you come here?"

Nick sighed and decided to fake it. He was an expert at such things. "I'm an insurance investigator, if you must know. Chase Dalton had some rather large policies, and of course there's a question as to the manner of his death."

"Insurance policies?" Bentley frowned, uncertain, but his hand came away from the gun. "Well, I'm looking after Mrs. Dalton's interests, so feel free to discuss anything with me."

"I couldn't go into it further at this time," Nick told him. "But I would like to know about your partnership with Mr. Dalton."

Bentley grunted and took out a slim cigar. He didn't offer one to Nick. "There were three of us in a holding company for Texas and Mexican real estate. Some grazing land here, and a few areas in the Mexican Sierras. There's been no profit so far."

"Who's the third partner?"

"Nobody you'd know."

"A man named Rufus Green, perhaps?" Nick asked, remembering his client with the expensive suit and cowboy boots.

"Yes." Bentley admitted. "How did you know?"

"I've already talked to Green." Nick answered honestly.

"With Dalton dead, we'll be liquidating the company. Green and I are to meet with Mrs. Dalton next week to draw up the necessary papers."

"Why would you have land in the Mexican mountains?" Nick asked innocently.

"Just an investment."

"Any connection with the Mexican gunmen this afternoon?"

Bentley frowned and thought about it. "I doubt that, though the customs guards say a hearse did cross the border shortly after the coffin was stolen. The Mexican police are searching for it."

"Why would anyone steal a body?"

The Texan shrugged. "May-

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be to hold it for ransom." Then he frowned at Nick. "Say, I came here to ask *you* questions and I end up answering them instead!"

Nick smiled as he showed Bentley to the door. "That's the way it is sometimes. Anyway, I'll be in touch with Mrs. Dalton about the insurance. Tell her not to worry."

He closed the door and leaned against it, thinking about the stolen coffin and his $40,000 fee. Then he went to the telephone and dialed the Dallas number that his client had given him. After a few moments he heard Rufus Green answer.

"This is Velvet."

"I heard about it. You work fast."

"It wasn't me. Someone else stole the coffin."

"What?" The voice was full of shock.

"Don't worry. I'll get it back for you."

"I'm depending on you, Velvet. I'm paying you a great deal of money for this thing."

"You didn't tell me you were Dalton's partner. And Greg Bentley's."

"Did I have to?"

"What's the deal on this land company?"

"It's nothing. We'll meet the widow next week and split it up. Nobody's getting rich on the deal. The only things make you rich in Texas are oil and cattle."

"All right," Nick told him. "I'll have the coffin in forty-eight hours—sooner, with luck. Where will you be?"

Rufus Green thought for a moment. "At the New Moon Motel in El Paso, tomorrow and Saturday. If you can't make it by Saturday night, phone me there."

Nick hung up and decided to turn in early. At that moment he had no idea where the leather coffin was, but he had a feeling that Rima Dalton might lead him to it.

She was at the motel early, before Nick had finished breakfast, wearing dark slacks and sweater, with large round sunglasses that covered too much of her face. "Ready to go?" she asked.

"Sure. Where to?"

"No questions! Trust me the way I trust you."

"I had a visitor last night. Greg Bentley."

"He owns this place. The room clerk probably phoned him as soon as you checked in." She led him to her car, and once they were under motion she said, "I have an idea about Uncle Chase's coffin. I want to look for it, but I can't go alone."

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"And I'm elected?"

"I have to trust you, Mr. Velvet—"

"Nick."

"—Nick. There's no one else."

"Can you tell me where we're going now?"

"To the airport—to get my plane."

"You fly? Besides driving this car as if it had wings?"

"Certainly. Harv taught me before he was killed in the crash. I've been flying for two years." She turned off the highway and he saw a private airfield ahead.

"And where are we flying? To the moon? Over the rainbow?"

She shook her head and pulled to a stop beside a sleek little blue Cessna. "No, to the Mexican marijuana field."

From the air it looked brown and rugged to Nick. Once they'd crossed the border and headed south over the Sierra Madre Orientals it seemed they had left all trace of civilization behind. "How do you know where the field is?" he asked Rima.

"I wasn't completely honest with you yesterday. Harv brought me there once, when he was teaching me to fly."

"Then he was flying in supplies when he crashed."

"I suppose so, yes."

"The field is owned by the holding company of Dalton, Green and Bentley, isn't it?"

She eyed him sideways. "You've learned a great deal in one day, Nick." Then she tipped the plane for a better view and he grabbed for a handhold. "There's the airstrip. We're going down."

"Why do you think the coffin is here?" he asked, trying to regain his composure. He didn't care for tiny planes.

"Something else I didn't tell you yesterday. The dark-haired man who held the pistol during the robbery—he reminded me of a man I met when Harv took me to the marijuana field. I could be wrong—I saw him only once and it was nearly two years ago. But I think he's a man named Fargo."

She made two passes at the mountain airstrip before bringing the Cessna in for a landing. As they coasted to a stop, a Mexican with a rifle came forward to meet them. Nick saw that it was the same type of army weapon that one of the bandits had carried, and he began to think she'd brought them to the right place.

The guard spoke to Rima in a quick, questioning Spanish that she understood better than Nick. She answered him, mentioning Fargo's name and

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Chase Dalton's. The Mexican nodded reluctantly and led them off along a trail that led down the mountain, through thick brush and exotic flowering bushes. This was a strange world to Nick.

It was half an hour before they reached their destination, coming suddenly upon a group of small individual fields slanting down a hillside. Each field was no more than a half acre in size, and in the nearest a group of sombreroed Mexicans worked at cutting the tall marijuana plants with their flowering tops. "It's harvest time," Rima explained. "The tops are most valuable—they bring $200 a pound."

Nick noticed that most of the workers carried pistols in their belts, and more than one eyed him with suspicion. They'd been there only a few moments when the dark-haired man from the funeral parlor appeared. He still carried the .45 automatic in his belt and his right hand was never far from it. "What do you want here?" he asked.

"I'm Rima, Chase Dalton's niece. Harv brought me here once, before he was killed."

"And who's this?" he asked, nodding toward Nick.

"A friend. We've come for my uncle's coffin, Mr. Fargo."

"Just like that!"

"Just like that. I recognized you yesterday."

"Well, if you've come for the coffin you can have it." They must have looked surprised, because he added, "The hearse is parked just over the hill. I drove it up a trail in the mountains."

They followed him over the crest of the hill and down again, past piles of drying marijuana leaves and little huts where Mexicans were pressing the dried leaves into bricks. "Interesting," Nick murmured.

"We have a nice operation here. Nice and neat."

"I notice your men are armed."

"The Mexican army has been searching for these fields. But it's a big country." Presently they came to a long black hearse, its body coated with mountain dust, parked under a giant yucca plant. "There it is."

Nick opened the rear door and stared in at the stolen leather coffin. The cowhide covering seemed intact, but he saw at once that the lid was not tightly closed. He lifted it carefully. "The body is gone!"

Fargo nodded. "We buried it down the hill. I'll show you."

"But why?" Rima gasped.

"We just wanted the coffin. We didn't want to dump the body. Hell, Chase Dalton was my employer. He owned this

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land. I liked him, so I gave him a decent burial."

"And why did you want the coffin?" Nick asked.

Fargo sighed and shifted the weapon in his belt to a more comfortable position. "Your uncle was a devious man, Miss Dalton. He owned this land along with Greg Bentley and Rufus Green—these fields and a lot more like them, all across northern Mexico, hidden in the mountains. Dalton was the major investor, and to keep the other two in line he devised a system whereby he kept all the property deeds in his possession. The locations and the output of the individual fields were known only to him. I was hired to supervise this particular group of fields, but even I don't know where the others are. Chase's son, Harv, flew in supplies to them, and that's how he got himself killed."

"How?" Rima asked, her voice a whisper.

"The story is that someone followed him in another plane—probably Green or Bentley, trying to locate the fields. Harv tried to lose them in the mountain passes and crashed his plane. Damn near broke the old man's heart, and it turned him against the whole operation." He took a fat, skillfully rolled cigarette from his pocket and lit it.

"I can't believe a cattleman as successful as Dalton would get into the marijuana business in the first place," Nick said.

Fargo's cigarette gave off little popping explosions as he smoked it. "It's the seeds popping," he told them casually. "Uncleaned marijuana has seeds." Then, "Dalton wasn't as successful as he seemed, not by a long shot. He kept trying for oil and never found it. Finally he turned to marijuana."

"But you said he turned against it after his son's death."

Fargo nodded. "He said he'd take the locations of the fields to the grave with him."

"To the grave—" Nick ran his fingers over the rough cowhide covering.

"Exactly," Fargo said. "There's a map of all the locations embossed in that leather. It's something Green and Bentley would give a lot to have."

"And you're going to let us take it?" Nick asked, unbelieving.

Fargo dropped the cigarette and ground it out beneath his boot. "Now did I say that?" he asked innocently, and before Nick could move, Fargo had the gun out of his belt.

"Nick!" Rima shouted, and threw herself at Fargo's arm. Off balance, the man went sprawling as the .45 automatic

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skidded into the underbrush.

"Come on!" Nick shouted.

"The others, Nick! They have rifles!"

He glanced at Fargo, but the man made no attempt to rise. Nick ran back up the path a few feet to where a pile of dried marijuana leaves awaited processing. He touched a match to the bottom of the pile and watched while the smoky fire caught hold. "That'll give them something to worry about," he told Rima. "Come on!"

In moments they were in the hearse, backing and turning it on the narrow road. As they finally headed down the narrow dirt road he glanced into the rear-view mirror and saw Fargo on his feet once more, standing in a haze of marijuana smoke. A Mexican at his side raised a rifle toward the fleeing hearse, but Fargo's hand restrained him. And then the road dropped and they were out of sight.

"Thanks for the help," he told Rima.

"It was easy," she said, and he had to agree. It was too easy.

Rufus Green was waiting for him at the motel in El Paso. He looked over the leather coffin, running his fingers carefully over the visible indentations, and asked, "No trouble?"

"No trouble," Nick told him. "The border guards weren't interested in an empty coffin."

"But where's the body?"

"Buried on a hillside in Mexico. You hired me to steal the coffin, remember?"

Green nodded. He took out a flashlight and played it on the leather covering, bringing out the indentations in sharp relief. "You see, Mr. Velvet? A map of northern Mexico."

"Very clever," Nick agreed. He suddenly thought of something—the man he'd seen following Green in New York.

"On Monday I have to meet with Mrs. Dalton and Bentley to dissolve a corporation."

"I know," Nick said. "Land in Texas and Mexico. With that map you'll know which parcels of land contain the marijuana fields. Right?"

Green shot him a hard glance. "You know too much."

"Give me the forty thousand and I'll be out of your life."

The Texan nodded. He took an envelope from his pocket and ponderously counted out eighty $500 bills. It was more money than Nick had ever received for an assignment, and he felt a bit guilty taking it. Rufus Green was hardly getting his money's worth.

Nick waited till after the meeting on Monday, watching from across the street as a

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black-clad Gilda Dalton left Bentley's office on her niece's arm. Then he followed them out to the Dalton ranch in his rented car. He was careful to park some distance away, and he approached the house from the rear, under cover of the autumn twilight.

He entered the house through the back door, walking softly, and stepped into the long high-ceilinged living room just as Mrs. Dalton raised a glass of champagne in a toast. She turned, along with Rima and Fargo and the pasty-faced, blond-haired man Nick had seen in New York. When Mrs. Dalton saw Nick, the glass slipped from her fingers and shattered on the hardwood floor.

"Sorry to interrupt," Nick said pleasantly. "It's just that I'm leaving town and I wanted to say goodbye to you fine people."

Rima Dalton took a step forward. "Nick, I—"

Fargo moved quickly in front of her, glancing at the others for instructions. "Should I take him out?"

Nick held up a hand. "Please. I'm not here to make trouble. I got my fee from Green, and it's no business of mine if you swindled him."

Gilda Dalton frowned at him. "Just how do you think we swindled Rufus Green?"

"By tricking him—and Bentley, too—into accepting Mexican land with a few marijuana fields while you kept the Texas land—on which I strongly suspect you've struck oil." He turned to Rima. "You and Fargo played a nice scene last week. If it hadn't been so easy—if I hadn't seen him keep a guard from shooting us—you'd have convinced me."

"How much do you know?" Gilda Dalton asked.

"I know that Chase circulated the story he would take the locations of the marijuana fields to the grave with him. Naturally Green got the idea there was a map on the coffin, which was exactly what you wanted him to think. You wanted him to go to a lot of trouble for that map, so he'd be convinced it was important. You couldn't just offer the Mexican land to Green and Bentley without rousing their suspicions, so you tricked them into wanting it—and not wanting the valuable Texas land."

"They deserved what they got," the woman in black said. "They killed my son last year, trying to follow him to the marijuana fields."

"The thing that baffled me at first was your theft of the very coffin I'd been hired to steal. I remembered how you collapsed in my arms, Mrs.

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Dalton, preventing me from interfering with Fargo and his bandits. And I knew Rima was putting entirely too much faith in me—a stranger. You had to steal the coffin before I got it, but then you had to deliver me to it so that I could get it back to Rufus Green. The reason, of course, is obvious."

"Is it?" the blond-haired man asked.

Nick nodded. "You didn't think Green would try to steal the coffin and its contents. But when you followed him to New York and overheard him hiring me to do just that, you had to act fast. Because, you see, if Green got the coffin and its contents, he'd discover that the body in it was not Chase Dalton's."

The blond-haired man took a step forward. "You can prove that?"

"You're the proof," Nick said. "You're Chase Dalton."

"Chase!" his wife gasped. "He knows!"

"You could dye your white hair blond and cover your weather-beaten face with make-up, but you couldn't disguise that limp. I saw you in New York, following Green, and then Rima happened to mention that one of your legs is shorter than the other. Of course you were taking a chance following someone like Green who knew you so well."

"All right," Chase Dalton said with a sigh. "You've got it. I followed him partly to see if the disguise would hold up. It did, and I got a bonus when I overheard him hiring you. Except that then Fargo had to steal the coffin before you got to it and dispose of the body."

"Whose body?"

"One of my ranch hands. The accident was real enough, and it was the chance I was waiting for. I paid a few people to say it was me. Once dead, my widow could liquidate the land corporation, and the Texas oil lands would be hers."

"And you?"

Chase Dalton shrugged. "I'd build up a new identity and in a couple of years I'd come along and marry my rich widow. We'd have a good life a long way from Texas, living on our oil royalties."

Nick nodded. He knew it all. There was nothing else to say. But then he had a final thought. "You've watched me at work, Mr. Dalton. If you ever need anything stolen I hope you'll call on me."

Chase Dalton frowned. "What would I want stolen?"

"I was thinking of the leather coffin," Nick answered with a grin, "in case you want to use it some day at your real funeral."

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the *NEWEST* story by

HELEN NIELSEN

Maria Morales was a jewel of a woman—scrupulously honest, a marvelous housekeeper and cook. Lyle Waverly, eligible young bachelor and society doctor, could hardly believe his good luck in getting Maria to run his house, and when the women in his life openly admitted that "Maria is a miracle—a perfect servant!"—well, he couldn't have been more pleased. And when Dr. Waverly needed more than a devoted servant, when he needed someone he could trust implicitly, Maria was there . . .

THE PERFECT SERVANT

by HELEN NIELSEN

Lieutenant Brandon was trying to bridge a generation gap when the woman walked into the police station and deposited a wad of currency on the counter. The trio of teen-agers he had charged with collecting hub caps that belonged to irate citizens seemed unimpressed with the idea that they had committed theft, and then the woman, who was in her middle forties, shabbily dressed and wearing a look of quiet despair in her eyes, relinquished a cheap money clip containing the bills and said, "Please, who is the officer I see about this?"

Brandon nodded for a uniformed officer to take away the teen-agers, grateful for a release from the pointless conversation, and asked the woman to state her problem.

"I was walking down the street—down Broadway," she stated, "and I saw this on the sidewalk. I picked it up. It is money."

Brandon pulled the bills out of the clip. There were three twenty-dollar bills, three tens, and two fives. "One hundred dollars," he said.

"Yes," the woman agreed. "I counted, too. That's a lot of money for someone to lose."

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It was a lot of money, and the woman looked as if she had never had her hands on that much at any one time in all her life. Brandon called the desk sergeant to fill out a report and explained to the woman that the money would be held for 30 days, during which time the real owner could report his loss, describe the bills and the clip, and have the money returned, or, failing a claimant, the money would then become the property of the finder.

"Your name?" asked the sergeant.

She hesitated. "Maria," she said. "Maria Morales."

"Occupation?"

"I have no work now. When I work I am a domestic."

"Address?"

She gave the number of a cheap roominghouse in the Spanish-speaking section of town. She told them she was very poor, unemployed, and without any property of her own. When the report was offered for her signature she placed both hands on the desk. A plain gold band adorned the third finger of her left hand.

"Just sign here, Miss Morales," the sergeant said.

"Mrs. Morales," she corrected. "I am a widow."

Brandon caught the desk sergeant's eye and shook his head in wonder.

"You should get those cocky young kids back in here to see this," the sergeant suggested.

"Waste of time," Brandon answered. "They wouldn't appreciate anything this square. Don't forget now, Mrs. Morales, in thirty days you check back with us. Chances are you'll get the money—or at least a reward."

"Thank you," she said in a very soft voice, "but I would rather have a job."

A young reporter from the Tucson daily came into the station just as Maria Morales was leaving, and Brandon, the bitter taste of the cynical teen-agers still in his mouth, related the incident of the honesty of Maria Morales. It was a slow day on the newsfront and when the morning papers came out, the story of the unemployed widow and the $100 was written up in a neat box on the front page.

By noon Lieutenant Brandon was flooded with calls from people who claimed the money, and also with job offers for Maria Morales. Having developed a protective interest in the widow, he took it upon himself to screen the offers and decided that the best prospect was Lyle Waverly, a bachelor and a physician with a lucrative practice among the country-club set.

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Waverly needed a housekeeper he could trust. He owned a fine home in one of the better suburbs and entertained a well-heeled social set. He offered Maria a home, a good salary, and free medical care for as long as she remained in his employ.

Brandon approved the credentials and gave Waverly the woman's address, feeling the kind of inner warmth he always got from delivering Christmas parcels to the Neediest Families.

Maria Morales was extremely pleased with young Dr. Waverly. He was easy to work for. The house was large but new, and there was a gardener to help with the heavy work. She was an excellent cook but, aside from breakfast, the doctor seldom dined in. He was a busy man in more ways than one, which was only natural for one so attractive and increasingly affluent.

It soon became apparent that the doctor's love life was divided between two women: Cynthia Reardon, who was 23 and the sole heir of Josiah Reardon of Reardon Savings and Loan, and Shelley Clifford, ten years older, who had an additional handicap of being already married to Ramsey Clifford, the owner of Clifford Construction Company. Clifford was a huge burly man of 50 who had too little time to spend with a lovely wife who liked younger men.

Maria observed these things with professional silence, and long before Dr. Lyle Waverly was aware of his destiny, she knew that Cynthia had the inside track and would eventually get her man.

Life was pleasant in the Waverly house and Maria had no desire to return to the kind of employment she had recently known. She began to plot a campaign of self-preservation. When the doctor gave her an advance on her salary, she purchased fitted uniforms with caps and aprons for the frequent cocktail parties he gave for his wealthy friends and patients.

He soon learned that a caterer was no longer necessary. Maria's canapés became the envy of every hostess, and she herself became a topic of conversation not unwelcome in the tension created whenever Cynthia and Shelley were present on the same occasion. Shelley had the prior claim—a fact made obvious by the way she took over as hostess. She was the "in" woman fighting against the inevitable successor, and only Clifford's preoccupation with business could blind him to what anyone else could

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see. Of the two women, Maria preferred Shelley, who was no threat to her own position as mistress of the house. Shelley wanted only Lyle Waverly; Cynthia wanted his name, his life, and his home.

"Maria is a miracle," Shelley explained at the second party. "Imagine finding someone with her divine talent who is honest as well. Why, she's a perfect servant!"

"An honest woman?" Cynthia echoed. "Impossible! No woman can be honest and survive! Maria must have a few secrets."

Maria smiled blandly and continued to serve the canapés.

"I refuse to believe it!" Dr. Waverly announced. "All my life I've searched for a pure woman and this is she!"

"Perhaps you'd better marry her, darling," Shelley said. "You could do worse."

That remark was aimed at Cynthia, and Maria didn't wait to hear the reply. She returned to the kitchen and began to clean up the party debris. It was sometime later, after most of the guests had gone home and even Ramsey Clifford had taxied off to catch a late plane for a business appointment, that she heard Shelley berating Dr. Waverly for his interest in Cynthia Reardon. Maria returned to the living room to collect abandoned glasses and saw them alone.

"You needn't think I don't know what you're doing," Shelley was saying. "You needed me when you were beginning your practice—you needed my contacts and influence. Now you want a younger woman."

"Shelley, please," the doctor begged.

"No, I'm going to have my say! You want a younger and a richer woman, don't you, darling? What better catch than Josiah Reardon's sexy daughter? You'll never hold her, Lyle. She'll wear you like a pendant until she's bored with you. She's used up half a dozen handsome young men already."

"I'm not a child!" Waverly protested.

"No. You're a man and vain enough to think you can use Cynthia Reardon. I'm warning you, you'll be the one who gets used!"

"You're jealous," Waverly said.

"Of course I'm jealous. I love you, and I need you, Lyle. Now *I* need *you*—"

Maria retreated quickly to the kitchen before she was noticed. Sometime later the doctor came in carrying the glasses. All the guests were gone. He loosened his tie and

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drew a deep breath. "The things they don't teach you in medical school!" he sighed. "Maria, you are the only sane person on earth. You must never leave me."

"I'll fix you a hot milk," Maria said.

"Oh, no—"

"A bromide?"

"Brilliant idea. Are you sure you never worked the social route before?"

Maria's face darkened. "I worked for women," she said. "I didn't like it. They talk about you in front of others. 'You just can't trust anyone these days,' she said with savage mockery. 'They'll steal you blind and expect to get paid besides!' "

Waverly laughed. "I think I understand why honesty is so important to you. By the way, the thirty days are up. Did you ever go back to claim that hundred dollars?"

"Tomorrow," Maria said. "Tomorrow I go."

"Good! I hope it's there. If it isn't I'll give you a bonus to make up for losing it."

Maria returned to the police station the next day. Lieutenant Brandon gave her a paper to sign and then handed her the money which was still held in the money clip made of cheap metal with a silver dollar for decoration. None of the claimants could identify the exact denominations of the bills or describe the clip, so the money was now legally hers.

"How's the job?" Brandon asked.

"The best one I ever had," Maria said.

"Now, that's what I like to hear! There's some justice in the world after all."

"Yes," Maria said, and slipped the money into her handbag.

Her position at the Waverly house continued to improve. She had her own room and, with an adequate household budget, was able to buy food less fattening than the starchy diet of the poor. She soon replaced her uniforms with a smaller size and had her hair done once a month. She was beginning to feel and look more like a woman. Waverly soon took notice.

"Maria," he said, "you never told me about your husband. He was one lucky guy. What was his name?"

"Wa—" she began.

"Juan?"

She smiled softly. "Yes," she said, "his name was Juan."

"Handsome?"

"Of course!"

"And a passionate devil, I'll bet! What do you have going for you now? There must be a boy friend somewhere."

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The doctor had been drinking. He slipped a friendly arm about her shoulder.

"No boy friend," Maria said.

"No? That's a shame! What's the matter? With legs like yours you could still do a fancy fandango. I'll bet you've done many a fancy fandango in your day."

"In my day—yes," Maria admitted.

"Then get back in circulation. Take a night off once in a while. Take tonight off. I'm going out with Miss Reardon."

"In that case, I think I should make you another bromide."

"No, you don't! I'm just a teensy-weensy bit drunk and I need much more fortification tonight. I'm going to ask Miss Reardon to marry me."

"She will accept," Maria said flatly.

"That's what I'm afraid of. You see, Maria, I've never been married. I'm afraid of marriage. I like women but I like my freedom better."

"Then why—?"

"Why marry? Because it's the thing to do. It's stabilizing. It builds character. It's what every rising young doctor should do, Maria, but I'm still scared. I don't like to be dominated."

"Then don't be dominated," Maria said. "Be the boss."

Waverly picked up his glass. "I'll drink to that," he said.

But it was Maria who feared the marriage more than Waverly. No sooner was the engagement announced than Cynthia began to reorganize the household, and Maria began to worry again about her security. Waverly caught her reading the want ads and demanded an explanation.

"What's the matter? Aren't you happy here?" he asked. "Do you want more money?"

"No," Maria said.

"Then what's wrong?"

"Things will change after you marry."

"What things? Don't you like Miss Reardon?"

"It's not what I like. It's what Miss Reardon likes."

"Stop worrying. Nobody's going to treat you the way you were treated before I found you. I like you and that's all that matters. I'll tell you something I was going to keep secret. I've had my lawyer draw up a new will—a man does that when he gets married. I've made a $5000 bequest in your behalf. Now do you feel more secure?"

Maria was reassured, but she had lived long enough to take nothing for granted except money in the bank. Dr. Waverly was impulsive and generous, but Cynthia Reardon was a spoiled, strong-willed girl and Shelley

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Clifford's description of her character was more accurate than anything a prospective bridegroom was likely to see. What's more, Shelley didn't give up the battle simply because the engagement was announced. The mores of Dr. Waverly's social set, Maria learned, were more liberal than her own.

Shelley immediately developed symptoms requiring the doctor's professional attention at indelicate hours—particularly when her husband was away on business. There were surreptitious calls going both ways. When Waverly finally refused to go to see Shelley again, she came to see him. Traveling over an unpaved, circuitous drive, Shelley's small imported coupe made the trip between the Clifford estate and the doctor's house with increasing frequency.

It was a shameful thing, Maria reflected, for a woman to cling so to a man. As much as she had loved her husband, she would have let him go the minute he no longer wanted her. But no matter how many women Walter might have had before their marriage, he was faithful to his vows. Walter—not Juan. Juan Morales was the name of the father Maria barely remembered. Walter Dwyer was the name of the man she had wed. But when one must work as a domestic for the Anglos, it seemed better not to let it be known that she had once been married to an Anglo, had once lived like a lady.

She had been, hardly 20 when Walter married her, but Walter was a gambler and gamblers die broke. After settling with the creditors, there was nothing for the widow Dwyer to do but return to Tucson and again become Maria Morales, domestic.

She had nothing left of the past but what Walter had called her "Irish luck," but her mind was no longer servile. She saw things now with the eyes of Mrs. Walter Dwyer, and what she saw was troubling. When a woman lost at love it was the same as when a man lost at cards. If she cried, she cried alone. What she could never do was cling to anything that was finished.

If Cynthia Reardon knew what was going on, she showed no outward sign. She might even be enjoying Shelley's humiliation. If Ramsey Clifford knew what was going on, he was indifferent. Eventually Dr. Waverly had it out with Shelley in a verbal battle over the telephone. Maria didn't eavesdrop. It was impossible not to hear him shouting in his study.

"No, I won't come over tonight!" he shouted. "There's

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nothing wrong with you, Shelley, and I won't come over tonight or any other night! I suggest that you get another doctor. I have no time for a chronic neurotic."

It was cruel, but it seemed to work. The telephone calls stopped. Two weeks before the scheduled wedding, Cynthia Reardon moved into the doctor's house and Maria's moral values were again updated. It seemed to be accepted practice in the young doctor's circle and Maria made no comment.

But her worst fears about her future status were soon confirmed. She couldn't please the new mistress who took Maria to task on the slightest provocation. The good days were finished. Cynthia was vicious. She would get whatever she wanted on her own terms either by using her sex or the lure of Josiah Reardon's wealth and prestige. If there was any doubt of who would rule the Waverly manse, it was decided the night of Josiah Reardon's prenuptial dinner party.

Once a week Dr. Waverly spent a day at the local free clinic, and, because Cynthia didn't care about these things, he sometimes talked about this work with Maria. It was the one thing of which he was genuinely proud, and because of it she was proud of him. A twelve-year-old Mexican boy had been under his care for some time. Minor surgery had been performed and confidence carefully built for the major surgery which, if successful, would restore him to a normal life. Half of the battle, Waverly assured her, was in the rapport he had established with the frightened boy. On the evening before the scheduled major surgery Reardon gave his dinner party. Maria heard the doctor try to get Cynthia to change the date.

"I have nine o'clock surgery," he said. "It's imperative that I get my rest."

"You're not the only doctor at the clinic!" Cynthia scoffed.

"But this is a special case!"

"And Daddy's dinner isn't, I suppose! Lyle, you must be mad. You know Daddy doesn't change his plans for anyone, and this is a very special occasion. You see, darling, you're the first man I've ever known that Daddy liked. He thinks you're a stabilizing influence for me. I happen to know what his wedding present is going to be. What would you think of fifteen percent of the Reardon Corporation?"

Dr. Waverly thought through a few moments of absolute silence. "You're dreaming."

"Then I must have dreamed the papers I saw Daddy's lawyer

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drawing up. That's what the dinner is for tonight—the presentation of the gift. Now I know you can get somebody else to take over for you tomorrow. It's not as if you had a paying patient. It's just one of those clinic cases."

Maria held her breath and said a silent prayer, but she lost. Waverly went to the dinner with Cynthia. It was almost two A.M. when he returned and, minutes later, Cynthia was at the door. Maria heard them laughing in the entry hall.

"You shouldn't have come here," Waverly said. "The old boy doesn't know we've jumped the gun, and he might not like it."

"He would loathe it—but who cares? Darling, isn't it wonderful? You see, I didn't lie to you. We've got something to celebrate."

"It's so late—"

"A little nightcap—please."

Maria, listening from the kitchen, sighed and went back to bed. In the morning she arose, made a pot of coffee, and carried it up to Waverly's room. He was asleep. Cynthia opened one eye and then threw a pillow at her.

"Nobody called you!" she whispered angrily.

"The doctor has a hospital call—"

"Cancel it! Tell them he's sick or something. Can't you see that he's asleep? If you don't call the hospital this minute, I will!"

Maria retreated from the room. She went downstairs and phoned the hospital to inform them that Dr. Waverly couldn't perform the nine o'clock operation. It was noon before the doctor came downstairs and that was just a few minutes after the hospital called to tell him that the boy had died on the operating table. It was a small event in the life of a young doctor who was slated to become the most popular society doctor in the area, but it destroyed Maria's last vision of Camelot.

She remembered that Walter, who was crude and uneducated, had once left a game during a winning streak—and that was the one thing he had taught her a gambler should never do—to donate blood to the black porter who parked his car at the casino each night. The friend who took over Walter's hand had lost everything, but that hadn't mattered because the porter lived and Walter came back as happy as a schoolboy playing hookey. And so Maria was thoroughly disenchanted with her position at the Waverly house even before the night that Shelley Clifford returned.

It was four nights before the

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wedding. Cynthia, tired from rehearsals of the ceremony, had gone up to bed and taken two sleeping pills. The doctor was preparing a deposit slip for the visit to the bank that he wanted Maria to make for him in the morning. Maria went to the front door when the bell rang and there was no way to keep Shelley out of the house. She had been drinking and was hysterical. One eye was blackened and she had a cut on one cheek. Her husband, she explained when Waverly hurried out of the study, had learned of their relationship and beaten her. Her story might be true or untrue, but the doctor's reaction was firm.

"You can't stay here!" he insisted.

"Just for tonight," she begged. "Ram's been drinking, too. I'm afraid to go home."

"I don't believe you," Waverly said. "Ram Clifford doesn't drink."

"He did tonight. I'm afraid, Lyle. I'm afraid he'll kill me!"

Maria watched the doctor's face. He looked as if he thought that might be a good solution. Firmly he took Shelley by the shoulders and turned her back toward the door.

"Then go to a hotel," he said.

"Why can't I stay here?"

"Because I won't let you."

Waverly was trying to keep his voice down. When Shelley noticed him glance apprehensively toward the stairs, she sensed immediately what he was trying to hide. Her eyes widened. "*She's* here, isn't she? Cynthia's *here!*" And then she laughed and pushed Waverly away from her. "You couldn't even wait for the marriage! Oh, that's beautiful! Now wouldn't old Josiah Reardon love to know about this! His daughter may be a swinger, but the old boy's a stickler for the proprieties! And there's nothing more conservative than a savings and loan corporation, darling. When they hear about this you may not get that partnership and seat on the Board of Directors."

"Get out of the house!" Waverly ordered.

"Oh, I will, I will—just as soon as I've run upstairs to check—"

She lunged past him and started to run up the stairs. Waverly was about two steps behind her when the liquor, the shock, and the injuries caught up with Shelley. She was more than halfway up the stairway when she stumbled and fell against the railing. She shrieked and grabbed at the air and then, as both Waverly and Maria watched in horror, she plummeted over the railing and fell

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to the marble floor of the entry hall. There was a sickening sound as her head struck the marble. She was dead when Dr. Waverly reached her.

For a few moments he was too stunned to speak. Then he turned to Maria. "You've got to help me," he said.

"What do you mean?" Maria asked.

"You saw what happened. It was an accident—she killed herself. But I can't have her found in my house like this. Can you drive a car, Maria?"

"Yes."

"Good. Cynthia's asleep. The pills I gave her will last until morning. I'll get my car out of the garage and you follow me in it. I'll take Mrs. Clifford's body in her car and leave it out on that short cut she uses."

Maria hesitated.

"Do you understand what I've said?" Waverly asked.

"I understand," Maria said, "but suppose the police come—"

"Out on that unpaved stretch? No chance. Anyway, I'll be the one taking the risk. I'll have the body with me. If you see a police car, just keep going."

"Still, there could be trouble," Maria said.

"Maria, there's no time to argue! I'm not going to hurt Mrs. Clifford—she's already dead. But I can't afford a scandal now. This is a matter of self-preservation!"

"With me, too, it is a matter of self-preservation," Maria said coldly.

It took the doctor a few seconds to understand Maria's words. He had taken her for granted too long a time to make a sudden change without a certain anguish. When he finally did understand, he asked how much self-preservation she had in mind.

"A will is risky," she said. "Wills can be changed. Five thousand dollars in cash is more reliable."

"I don't have that much money in the house," he protested.

"I'll take a check," Maria said.

Minutes later, the doctor's check tucked away in her handbag, Maria drove Waverly's sedan at a safe distance behind Mrs. Clifford's little sports car. There was no traffic at all on the narrow road. When they reached a wide shoulder forming a scenic view over a ravine, Waverly stopped the small car and parked off the roadway. Maria stopped the sedan and watched him carry Shelley Clifford's body to the edge of the shoulder and toss it into the shrubbery.

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Waverly then returned to the car and emptied Shelley Clifford's handbag of all cash and credit cards. Leaving the emptied purse on the seat, and pocketing the items that a robber would steal, he then took out his pocketknife and jammed it between the treads of one rear tire, letting out the air. The scene was set: a flat tire on a seldom-used road; a passing car hailed and a grim harvest of murder and robbery.

Waverly folded his pocketknife and walked to the waiting sedan. He drove the car back to the house himself and then he and Maria scrubbed away the bloodstains on the marble entry floor.

When they had finished, Waverly said, "Nothing happened here tonight."

"Nothing," Maria agreed, "except that there's a bloodstain on your coat sleeve, Doctor. Give me the coat and I'll sponge out the stain before I go to bed."

Waverly pulled off his suit coat and gave it to her without hesitation. "Don't call me in the morning," he said. "I'm going to take a couple of sleeping pills myself."

Maria took the coat to her room but she didn't sponge out the blood. She turned off the light and tried to sleep. When that didn't work, she got up and packed her bag. In the morning, she got the doctor's bank deposit from his study, the suitcase and the stained coat from her room, and then, because the keys were still in the ignition, drove the doctor's car to the bank. Ordinarily she would have taken the bus. Today was urgent. Because she was so well known at the bank, and particularly after having made the doctor's deposit, she had no difficulty cashing the check for $5000.

On the return trip she took the unpaved short cut. No other cars passed and she reached Mrs. Clifford's abandoned coupe unseen. Drawing alongside, she tossed Dr. Waverly's coat into the front seat, and then drove on.

Both Waverly and his fiancé were still asleep when Maria returned the doctor's sedan to the garage. Then, bag in hand, she walked to the bus stop.

Shelley Clifford's body was found early in the afternoon. The story of her death was on the evening television newscasts. An apparent victim of a casual murderer, her death inspired urgent editorial demand for increased police patrols and an end to permissive education. Ramsey Clifford offered a $10,000 reward for the apprehension and conviction of her murderer. It wasn't

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until the third day after Shelley's body was found that Lieutenant Gannon came to Dr. Waverly's house. He carried a small bundle wrapped in brown paper.

"I've been doing some checking, Doctor," he said. "I understand that you and the late Shelley Clifford were very good friends."

"You've picked up some gossip," Waverly stated.

"I don't think so. We didn't release all the evidence we had in her death when the body was found. We needed a little time to check out something that was found in the seat of her car—" Gannon ripped open the package and held up Waverly's suit coat. "We've traced this to your tailor, Dr. Waverly, and we've matched the bloodstains to Mrs. Clifford's. Now all we want from you is an explanation of what it was doing in her car."

On the fourth day after Shelley Clifford's death a smartly dressed, middle-aged woman checked into a hotel on the Nevada side of Lake Tahoe. She signed the register as Mrs. Walter Dwyer and then took a stroll through the casino because the atmosphere of a gambling town made her feel closer to Walter. Later, upstairs in her room, she studied the Tucson newspaper she had picked up in the lobby and was amused to learn that the police of that area were conducting an intensive search for her body.

Confronted with his blood-stained jacket, Waverly had told the truth—but he wasn't believed. When it developed that his housekeeper had last been seen on the morning of Mrs. Clifford's death cashing a $5000 check at Waverly's bank, Lieutenant Gannon formed the theory that Waverly had used Maria Morales to get him some ready cash in the event the doctor was linked to Mrs. Clifford and had to leave the country, and had then disposed of the woman so she wouldn't talk.

It was all nonsense, of course, and Maria was sure that Gannon could prove nothing. No crime had been committed. The worst that could happen to Dr. Waverly was that his marriage would be called off. That was a little sad since he deserved Cynthia Reardon as much as she deserved him. The other thing that would happen —and this was the reason she had placed the doctor's coat in Mrs. Clifford's car—was that the community would be made aware of Waverly's true character. This was imperative, in Maria's mind, in view of the nature of his profession.

Mrs. Dwyer remained at the

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otel for several weeks. By that ime the Tucson papers no onger referred to the Shelley lifford affair, and she could ssume that it was in a state of ermanent limbo with no need or her reappearance to save Waverly from a murder charge.

Before leaving the resort, Irs. Dwyer put a down ayment on a smartly furnished ondominium apartment which, he salesman assured her, would ring a prime weekly rental in igh season. Mrs. Dwyer ex- lained that she traveled in her ork and would occupy the partment only a few months f the year, but that it was nice o have roots somewhere and a oman did need a good ivestment for her retirement ears.

A few days later, a shabbily ressed woman, wearing a look f quiet despair in her eyes, ntered the Tahoe bus station. he carried a cheap suitcase and handbag containing $100 in a ioney clip. The bills were ld—in fact, they were the same ills, in the same money clip, iat Maria Morales, who was ien 19 and the prettiest cocktail waitress on the Strip, saw drop from Water Dwyer's pocket as he bent over a casino gambling table. Maria had nothing of her own but a $10 advance on her salary, and when she returned the $100 to Dwyer he was so impressed by her honesty, and other attributes, that he took her to dinner. A week later they were married and the marriage was for love—not the cheap bargain that Dr. Lyle Waverly had tried to make with Cynthia Reardon. The money and the clip had been Walter's wedding present.

"Keep it for luck," he said. "Your Irish luck" . . .

In the bus station Maria bought a ticket to Sacramento, the state capital of California. There would be many wealthy people in that area who were so nervous about their own corruption that they would be eager to hire a housekeeper honest enough to go to the police station with $100 found on the street while looking for a job.

Walter had taught her never to walk out on a winning streak.

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a *NEW* Mr. Strang story by

WILLIAM BRITTAIN

As you know from previous adventures, Mr. Strang is the gnome-like little teacher at Aldershot High School who, through curious circumstances, has acquired a sideline—sleuthing. Well, for the first time in his criminological career Mr. Strang finds himself involved in a major mystery—death; and the only way the little old science teacher can penetrate the mystery is to investigate a ghost story—scientifically, of course . . .

MR. STRANG HUNTS A BEAR

by WILLIAM BRITTAIN

"Leonard, I'm relieving you of all your classes for the rest of the day." Marvin W. Guthrey, principal of Aldershot High School, watched as a scowl of annoyance twisted the already seamed face of the teacher seated on the opposite side of his desk. Why was it, Guthrey wondered, that whenever they talked, Mr. Strang could fill him with a sense of uneasiness without saying a word? Certainly the thin old teacher didn't cut a very prepossessing figure. In his wrinkled suit and with his sparse crop of gray hair looking as if it hadn't been combed in weeks, he wasn't exactly Guthrey's idea of what a high-school teacher should look like. And he didn't even have to teach today. Couldn't the man at least show a little gratitude?

Mr. Strang was not grateful. His chemistry students desperately needed further review for the upcoming final examination, and the substitute teacher who had been hurriedly summoned to replace him turned out to have had all her preparation in English and couldn't tell an Erlenmeyer flask from a benzene ring. In addition, having taught at Aldershot for over a third of a century, Mr. Strang knew that no teacher is ever called from

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his classroom unless the principal has some ulterior—and usually unpleasant—motive.

In silence he began polishing his black-rimmed glasses on an acid-stained necktie.

"I got a telephone call about an hour ago," Guthrey went on. "The caller requested an appointment to see you."

"I see," replied Mr. Strang, even though he didn't see at all. Parent interviews were always held during a teacher's free period or after school, never during classtime.

"The caller," said Guthrey with almost religious awe, "was Letitia Ingraham Balt."

Letitia Ingraham Balt, whom a New York newspaper had once referred to as "the globe-hopping grandma of the jet set," had moved into a huge mansion at the edge of the village of Aldershot some ten years ago, just after the death of her husband, Mortimer. In his day Mortimer Balt had possessed an uncanny knack for buying up barren pieces of land which, once he had acquired title, seemed only to need the surface scratched to pour forth limitless barrels of crude oil. Therefore, when Letitia came to the village, she was given almost as grand a welcome by the local bank as by Aldershot's social set.

For years Letitia had only one interest in life—herself. She delighted in arranging "intimate little parties" at her home at which a hundred or more guests were asked to meet her latest social acquisition: a U.S. senator, a prize-winning novelist, or perhaps a movie star. On completion of one of these affairs she would jet off to some exotic locale to be feted by heads of state, artistic and cultural leaders, and the Beautiful People, each jaunt lovingly chronicled by the social columnists of the nation's leading newspapers.

But then the giddy social whirl came to an abrupt halt when Letitia Balt received word that her only daughter and son-in-law had both perished in the flaming wreckage of an airplane crash.

The couple left a child—a nine-year-old boy whom severe rheumatic fever had turned into an invalid. Letitia sent for him. From the moment he arrived and was wheeled into her presence, she abandoned the life of the jet set and devoted herself wholly to the boy's welfare. Some said her selflessness couldn't last and were surprised when it did. And equally surprising, she seemed more happy when attending to her grandson's needs than ever before in her life.

And then the boy died . . .

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"It was about six months ago, wasn't it, Leonard?" asked Guthrey. "Weren't you giving him some private tutoring about then?"

Mr. Strang nodded. "He was pretty good in science, and Mrs. Balt called me one day and asked if I'd help him find the answers to some questions he had. We seemed to hit it off together, and I arranged to show him some of the experiments he was too weak to do himself. But I haven't seen Mrs. Balt since Bobby's death. I wonder what she wants now?"

"So do I," said Guthrey. "I hope it doesn't mean trouble for the school. Her word carries a lot of weight in this town." He jabbed at the intercom on his desk. "Joanne," he said into the speaker, "send in Mrs. Balt."

He glanced across at Mr. Strang. "Please, Leonard," he pleaded, "be on your best behavior. Regardless of what she says, show a little respect—for my sake. If you don't and with the connections she's got, I might be the first high-school principal to be fired by the President of the United States."

The door behind Mr. Strang opened, and Letitia Ingraham Balt entered the office. Slender and scarcely an inch over five feet tall, she bore herself with an air that was proud but not vain. Well into her sixties, she was still a classically beautiful woman.

As she approached the desk, Mr. Strang stood and turned to her. "Lettie," he said softly. "How good to see you again."

Guthrey wondered if he should ask Mr. Strang to use a more formal term of address. But as he pondered the problem, Mr. Strang took Mrs. Balt's hand gently in his own and brought it to his lips. As he kissed it, Letitia made a slight curtsy. The gesture, so old-fashioned and yet so thoroughly charming, brought to the principal's mind visions of another age—an age of Strauss waltzes and elegant horse-drawn carriages. He began to feel distinctly out of place in his own office.

"I suppose you'd like to talk to Mr. Strang alone," said Guthrey, hoping to be contradicted.

"If you don't mind," answered Letitia.

With a shrug and a final stern look at Mr. Strang, Guthrey left the office.

"Mr. Guthrey seemed upset about something when I first came in," said Letitia with a slight frown.

"I imagine it was because I called you 'Lettie,' " replied Mr. Strang. "He's quite impressed with your position in the

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community, and he probably thought I was being too familiar."

"Good heavens, Leonard!" replied Letitia with a trilling laugh. "After all you did for Bobby? Why, my grandson used to say he never enjoyed anything as much as your visits with him. After the happiness you brought to that boy you could call me Bawdy Mab if you wanted to. I hope we're good enough friends not to be too formal when it comes to names."

"Of course we are, Lettie." Mr. Strang offered her a chair and pulled up another for himself. "Now what can I do for you?"

"It's about Bobby."

"Bobby? But he's . . ." The teacher's voice trailed off lamely.

"Yes, Leonard, he's dead. His heart never was too strong. But I want you to find out something for me."

"Find out something? But what?"

"I want you to find out whether or not I killed my grandson."

The sudden silence in the principal's office was almost palpable. Mr. Strang stared at the woman seated opposite him, and she returned the stare without flinching.

"Lettie," breathed Mr. Strang, "it's not possible that—I mean, you couldn't— It's nonsense! You're not a murderer. Besides, the papers said it was his heart."

"No, it wasn't murder. But I think I killed him just the same. That's why I've come to you."

"But wouldn't a doctor—"

"Oh, Leonard, I've talked to doctors from all over the world. I've even had the police in. And private investigators."

Mr. Strang didn't like the shrill, almost hysterical tone of Letitia's voice. He patted her hand soothingly. "But, Lettie," he said. "I'm only a teacher. What could I—"

"One of the men I talked to about Bobby's death was an Aldershot detective. Paul Roberts."

Mr. Strang smiled. "I know Paul quite well," he said. "A good man."

"He came to the same conclusion as everyone else—that I'd killed my grandson. But he did say that if there was anything new to be learned you'd be the one to find it."

"That doesn't sound like Paul Roberts talking."

"Well." Letitia's eyes twinkled through the tears. "His actual words were, 'That scrawny old goat's got a built-in crystal ball'—but it comes to the same thing."

Mr. Strang rose from his

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chair. "Lettie, if there's anything I can do, of course I'll help you. But don't expect miracles. Now tell me about it."

"Leonard, I'd be very grateful if you'd see me home. Once we're there, I can explain. It'll be much easier than trying to tell about it here."

"But Mr. Guthrey—"

"It's all arranged with Mr. Guthrey. And don't tell me you're too busy or give me any other excuse, because I've made up my mind. I'm not one of your students, Leonard Strang, whom you can order about whenever you feel like it."

The teacher was grateful for the smile that appeared on Letitia's lips as she rose and took his arm.

Letitia's huge foreign automobile was chauffeured by a young giant of a man who was introduced to Mr. Strang as Carl Drew. "I employed Carl just a few weeks before Bobby's death," Letitia explained. "He was awfully good to the boy. You should see the small animals he carved just to please a sick child. Now he's my driver, butler, and general handyman."

The Balt estate was just as Mr. Strang remembered it—immense. The main house was a Victorian architectural monstrosity, its walls and roof sprouting bay windows, cupolas, and turrets in wild profusion. The grounds, however, sadly needed the services of a gardener.

"I've cut back on my staff since—since it happened. I lost interest," said Letitia. "Now there's only Carl and Janet."

Mr. Strang remembered Janet Ramsey and greeted her warmly as she opened the front door for them. A pretty nurse in her early thirties, she had originally come to the Balt estate seven years before to care for Letitia during a siege of pneumonia. She had stayed on, and when Bobby arrived, her nurse's training was invaluable.

"It's good to see you again, Mr. Strang," she smiled. "Mrs. Balt usually has tea about now. Can I get you something?"

"Coffee would be fine," said Mr. Strang, and Janet strode toward the kitchen, her starched skirt rustling.

Looking up the wide curving stairway, Mr. Strang considered the elevator chair that had been installed on the wall. "I had that put in for Bobby," said Letitia, "along with a speaker system from his room to the kitchen. Janet had enough to do without climbing stairs all the time, and of course, unless Carl was around, it was impossible to get the boy from one floor to another without it."

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Mr. Strang accompanied Letitia into the great living room and sank deeply into a chair. "Let's get down to cases," he said, stoking up his massive briar pipe. "What's this nonsense about your killing Bobby?"

"It started right here in this room," replied Letitia, "when I told Bobby a ghost story."

"A ghost story?"

"Yes, I suppose it was foolish, considering his condition, but you see, Bobby had a fondness for ghost stories. He read them every chance he got, and when I saw how much he enjoyed them, I began telling him some. Oh, not after dusk, with flickering fires in darkened rooms. I used to tell him a different one every day, while we ate lunch. Right here in this room, in broad daylight."

"I see. How did they affect him?"

"He'd smile and clap his hands while I was talking. When I told him one he especially liked, he'd say, 'That's great, Grandma.' He reacted that way to the story about the burning bear."

"The burning bear?"

"That was the story I told him on the day he—he—"

"Can I hear it?"

"It's not much of a story, really. It's about an Indian hunter who was out in the woods one winter, searching for something to feed his starving family. He came upon a cave where a bear was hibernating. He wanted to kill the bear, but first he asked the blessing of the manito, an Indian spirit.

"He heard the strange voice of the manito come to him on the wind." Letitia cupped her hands about her mouth and began chanting softly in an eerie tone. "The manito refused permission to kill the bear. But the Indian didn't listen. Piling sticks in the cave, he set fire to them. When the fire died down, the bear had been burned to death.

"That night, while the Indian and his family feasted on the bear, there suddenly came a roaring from the forest around them." Again Letitia cupped her hands, this time making the sound of a large animal in pain. "Into the light leaped a huge bear. But instead of having fur, its entire body was covered with a green fire. The Indian fled, chased by the bear. Neither was ever seen or heard from again. But the little bits of fox-fire you sometimes see glowing in the forest are supposed to be what was left of the Indian after the bear was finished with him."

She shrugged and spread her arms. "End of story," she said.

Mr. Strang puffed his pipe in

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silence for several moments. "I'm sorry, Lettie," he remarked finally, "but I can't find anything particularly unnerving about the fiery bear. Especially if Bobby heard the story in broad daylight. What happened when you finished the story?"

"Nothing. Bobby read until almost three o'clock, then he went up for his nap."

"Alone?"

There was a rattling of cups as Janet Ramsey entered the room, a tray balanced expertly on one shoulder. "Of course not, Mr. Strang," said the nurse, pouring the tea and coffee. "Bobby couldn't go anywhere except in a wheel chair. I put him on the elevator and walked up beside him." She turned to Letitia. "I'm sorry to interrupt, Mrs. Balt, but I couldn't help overhearing you."

"That's all right, my dear. We've gone over this story so many times, so many times. There's nothing private about it any more. Perhaps it would be better if you continued, Janet, since you put him to bed."

"There's really not much to tell. When I reached the top of the stairs, I put Bobby in his wheel chair. I remember, though, that Carl was working on some pipes in the upstairs bathroom, and I had to tell him to be more quiet. I put Bobby on the bed, pulled the covers over him, and closed the door. That's about all."

"Except that this time Bobby overslept," added Letitia.

"Overslept?" Mr. Strang's eyebrows shot upward.

"Yes," said the nurse. "Usually Bobby woke by himself between six and half-past. But when I finished preparing dinner I saw it was after seven, and he was still asleep."

"What did you do then?"

"I didn't think much about it at first. You see, Mr. Strang, during that time Bobby was having an onset of what I call the shakes—jerky movements of the arms and head. The technical name is chorea. It's often a result of severe rheumatic fever."

The teacher nodded. "I've heard of it," he said. "We used to call it St. Vitus's dance."

"When he had these spells he was exhausted most of the time. I felt he needed his sleep. But finally, by seven thirty, I began getting worried. Carl was still upstairs, so I called him and asked him to wake Bobby."

"We were standing right over there," Letitia said, pointing. "At the foot of the stairs. We heard Carl knocking on Bobby's door, but then he came to the landing and said Bobby didn't answer and his door was locked.

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Of course we rushed up to see what the matter was. That is, Janet rushed up and I followed a few seconds later."

"What kept you, Lettie? You seem spry enough."

"I had to get the room key from the pantry where we keep it. And in my hurry I was delayed—I spilled strawberry jam all over a beautiful sketch Janet was making of the view from the window there."

"And after you got the key, Lettie, you went up and joined the others outside Bobby's door?"

Letitia nodded. "When I got there Janet was shouting and Carl was in a positive panic trying to break down the door. Janet took the key from me—my hands were shaking too much to use it—unlocked the door and opened it. Oh, Janet, you seemed to take forever to open that door."

"I didn't think we ought to go bursting in on him like a tribe of wild savages."

"That's when he cried out, Leonard." Letitia buried her face in her hands and sobbed. Mr. Strang placed a gentle hand on her shoulder.

"He cried out," said the teacher softly. "What did he cry out, Lettie?"

Letitia lifted her head to look at the ceiling as if silently begging some higher power for courage. Her face was twisted with the anguished memory of that moment in her grandson's room.

"The bear!" she whispered, the words seeming to force themselves past her lips. "That's what he screamed, Leonard—'The bear! It's coming after me!' Over and over again. Oh, Leonard, it was the most awful moment of my life."

"I switched the lights on right away," said Janet, "and went to the boy. His heart pounded several times as if it would leap out of his body. Then—it stopped. He was dead before the doctor got here."

"That's the whole story, Leonard." Letitia wiped her eyes with a small handkerchief and made a valiant attempt to pull herself together. "If I hadn't told Bobby that story he'd be alive today."

Mr. Strang turned to the nurse. "I suppose the doctor certified the cause of death?" he asked.

Janet nodded. "Bobby was frightened, and when his heart began to beat faster, the damaged valves couldn't handle the increased load. It's not uncommon in these cases."

Mr. Strang motioned for Janet to leave him alone with Letitia. She nodded understandingly and tiptoed out.

"Lettie?"

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"Yes, Leonard?"

"You can't keep blaming yourself. It was an accident, that's all."

"So you think I killed him, too."

"Lettie, it's not a case of killing him. You only did what you thought would please the boy, but you can't keep on blaming yourself."

"But he was all I had after my daughter died. I was going to see to it when I passed on that he would inherit everything."

Something occurred to Mr. Strang. "You haven't made out a new will?" he asked quickly.

"No."

"As things stand now, who'll inherit?"

"Aside from a few small bequests, the entire estate goes to charity. My daughter's husband is—was—quite wealthy, and she had no need of money."

So much for hidden motives, thought Mr. Strang. He looked at the ashen face of the seated woman. He wished he knew some words of comfort, but whatever he said would be useless. In her own mind Letitia had convicted herself of murder, and yet—

"Brachiopoda!" he muttered angrily. There had to be something he could do. "Lettie," he snapped in a commanding voice, "I'd like to see Bobby's room."

"Of course, Leonard. It's just as it was when he—on that day. I've kept it locked since then as—as a memorial, I suppose. I clean it myself, and the only others who've been in it were the police and the investigators I employed."

They climbed the stairs and walked along the hallway until they reached a small door at the end. "The room isn't very big," said Letitia, turning the key in the lock. "But it's bright and cheerful. Bobby loved it."

As the door swung inward, Mr. Strang noticed that the lock was of a spring type. That would explain the locked door, he thought. The catch snapped into place as soon as the door was closed. No key was necessary to lock it.

Two windows threw the late afternoon sun across the small bed. Underneath these windows was a bench which ran the length of the room. On it were a telephone, some pieces of scientific apparatus, most of which the teacher himself had provided, and several wood carvings. He picked up one of them.

"A bear," he said to Letitia. "Pretty good job of carving, too. Did Bobby do this?"

"No, it was Carl. He carved several things for Bobby, but

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this little bear was his favorite."

"There's nothing frightening about this bear at least." Mr. Strang examined the closets and found nothing. The autographed pictures of world-famous men and women which decorated the room's white walls were interesting but not helpful. A boy's clothing, showing none of the wear and tear of active play, hung from two rows of hooks fastened to the inside of the door through which they had entered.

There was a soft tapping on the door. Mr. Strang released the spring lock and opened it. Janet Ramsey looked past him to Letitia.

"Excuse me, Mrs. Balt," she said, "but it's nearly seven, and dinner is ready. Should I—" She nodded at Mr. Strang.

"Of course, Janet, set another place. Please say you'll stay, Leonard. Please don't leave yet. Perhaps—"

"Certainly I'll stay, Lettie," replied the teacher.

The meal was an elaborate affair at which Mr. Strang regaled Carl and the two women with wildly exaggerated accounts of his adventures as a teacher at Aldershot. When it was over, Janet commandeered Carl to help with the dishes while Mr. Strang and Letitia stood on the front porch, admiring the sunset.

"I suppose you'll have to be leaving . soon," said Letitia finally.

The old teacher nodded. "I'm sorry I couldn't be of more help, Lettie."

"Oh, Leonard, I wish the sun would never set. I don't want to be here alone when it's dark and know that—Leonard, what's the matter?"

Mr. Strang had pulled the black-rimmed glasses from his face and was staring fixedly at the red half disk of the sun on the horizon. "That's it, Lettie," he said in a hoarse whisper. "That's got to be it."

"What are you talking about?"

Instead of answering, Mr. Strang took Letitia by the arm and hurriedly steered her back into the house.

"The key, Lettie," he said, extending his hand.

"What key?"

"The one to Bobby's room. I'm going back up there."

"Of course, if you think it best. I'll come with you."

"No, Lettie, you stay here. Wait until the sun has set before you come up. And when you do, make sure Janet and Carl"—he jerked a thumb in the direction of the kitchen—"have something to keep them busy. Get them out of the house if possible."

Letitia handed him the key

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and he ran up the stairs, pausing to get his breath when he reached the top. He turned to look down at Letitia and placed a finger to his lips. Then he scuttled to the door of the dead boy's room, unlocked it, and darted inside.

Twenty minutes later, seated in the darkness, Mr. Strang looked through the window and saw a light in the garage. Carl and Janet had walked across the lawn and entered the building. Seconds later a small sports car raced off into the darkness.

He heard footsteps in the hall. There was a gentle tapping on the door. "Leonard, are you in there?" asked Letitia's voice quietly. "I sent Carl and Janet out to a movie. They'll be gone for the remainder of the evening."

He switched on the lights, opened the door, and motioned to her to come inside. As she entered he pushed the door shut behind her.

"I took the liberty of using the telephone while I was here," he whispered. "I hope you don't mind."

"Not at all. Whom did you call?"

Without replying Mr. Strang gestured toward the small bed. "I want you to lie down, Lettie," he said.

"Why, whatever for? Really, Leonard, I feel perfectly all right. I don't need to rest."

Mr. Strang whipped off his glasses and tucked them into a jacket pocket. "I think I've got the answer, Lettie," he said gently. "I know how Bobby was killed. And you had nothing—almost nothing—to do with it."

Letitia stared at the old teacher, shaking her head in disbelief. "You mean I really wasn't responsible for—"

"No, Lettie, you weren't. But it wouldn't do any good to just tell you about it. I've got to show you so that you won't have any doubts later and won't start punishing yourself again. Lie down, please."

Slowly, still looking incredulously at Mr. Strang, Letitia made her way to the bed, lowering herself onto the soft mattress.

"Now close your eyes," Mr. Strang commanded. "Keep them closed while I talk to you."

"All right, Leonard." There was a soft click, and even through closed eyelids Letitia could sense that the lights had been turned off.

"The room is completely dark now," said Mr. Strang in a soothing voice. "Just the way it was that day six months ago when Bobby was awakened from his nap."

"Why, that's right. It was

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dark outside. But what's that got to do with it?"

"That's the one thing I hadn't considered, Lettie. It's now June—final exam month. When we came up here just before dinner, there was still a good two hours of sunlight. But Bobby died six months ago—in the middle of winter. The short days, as well as the fact that we weren't on daylight-saving time then, meant that on the day he died Bobby would wake up in darkness. Isn't that the way it was, Lettie?"

She could hear a rustling of cloth being shifted somewhere near her in the room. "Yes, it was dark, Leonard. But I still don't see—"

Mr. Strang spoke slowly and softly, calming her jangled nerves. "Now, Lettie, I want you to use your imagination. But be sure and keep your eyes closed. For a little while you're not going to be the wealthy lady who owns this house. You're Bobby, an eleven-year-old boy with a rheumatic heart. In addition, you're having an attack of chorea—what Janet calls 'the shakes.' You're exhausted, but because of the twitching of your body you find it impossible to sleep."

In spite of herself Letitia felt her arms jerk involuntarily.

"Perhaps you've been given something to calm you down. Phenobarbital maybe. You're not fully conscious but instead are experiencing a kind of 'twilight sleep.' You're too exhausted to move, but you have some kind of awareness of things around you."

"Nobody in his right mind would give phenobarbital to a person with a rheumatic heart," protested Letitia. "Even I know that."

"But Bobby wouldn't," the teacher droned on. "He wouldn't even know he'd taken it if it were put in his milk or something. And you're Bobby now. Remember that—you're Bobby."

Suddenly there was a sound in the darkness. At first she couldn't make it out. Her eyes still closed, she strained to listen.

Mr. Strang was chanting the words of the manito in her ghost story.

The bear, the fiery bear. Oh, why had she told Bobby that story? It wasn't possible, of course, that the bear could actually exist.

And then the growling sound came to her ears. That had to be Leonard, too. But it was so real. She imagined some forest bear prowling about the room. She had to think the way Bobby thought. Leonard had told her to.

The growling stopped. Sever-

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al minutes passed, and in spite of the odd circumstances Letitia felt her mind becoming foggy with sleep. This would never do. Still, Leonard was there to protect her from the bear—the bear—

She had almost dozed off when from somewhere in the room she heard a loud pounding. "Bobby, wake up!" came a muffled voice. Involuntarily she opened her eyes and sat up. Startled, she shook her head to clear her mind. She looked about to locate the teacher in the inky blackness of the room.

And then she screamed.

The thing was poised beyond the bed like some diabolical nightmare. It had the shape of a bear, but such a bear as might appear from the deepest pit of hell. The outstretched forepaws, the huge torso, the slavering jaws loomed before her—all in a green fire that glowed in the dark.

And the awful thing moved, moved—

"Leonard!" she shrieked.

The lights of the room snapped on, and as abruptly as it had appeared, the bear vanished. Mr. Strang peered around the open door. He walked over to Letitia, his feet shuffling through a pile of boy's clothing.

"Now you know what really killed your grandson," said the teacher. "Imagine the condition you would be in if your heart were as weak as his."

"But the bear—" Letitia moaned.

"Luminous paint—the bear was drawn on the inside of the door," replied the teacher. "It wasn't noticed when the lights were on because in the light the color of the luminous paint exactly matches the rest of the door. I imagine these things hanging on the hooks helped conceal it, too." He indicated the clothing on the floor.

"That's why none of your hired investigators ever found anything," he went on. "Either they searched this room in the daytime, or they opened the door at night and switched on the lights at the same time. I made the same mistake until I remembered how dark it would be in here at seven thirty in the middle of winter."

"But who—"

"Janet," said Mr. Strang. "It had to be her."

"But she wouldn't do a thing like that! She loved Bobby too much."

"Let me explain how it must have happened, Lettie. Janet overheard your ghost story that day. She realized she could get rid of Bobby and make everyone believe you were responsible—everybody includ-

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ing you, Lettie. She came up here and drew the picture of the bear on the door—if she didn't have the luminous paint she had plenty of time that afternoon to go into town and get it. And you've already told me she's a good artist."

"Leonard, you mentioned phenobarbital."

"That's something I can't prove, but it sounds plausible. As a nurse she'd have access to it, or some other sedative. She'd know how to give him just enough to make him drowsy, and while she was up here she took the clothes off the door. Remember, Bobby couldn't see the bear in the daylight. And she undoubtedly made sure the spring lock was set.

"After that she went back downstairs to the kitchen. I imagine she piped the chants and growls of your burning-bear story to Bobby's room through the speaker you mentioned. The kitchen would be too far from the living room for you to hear.

"Later on Bobby didn't call out at the usual time because of the drugs he'd been given. The alarm was raised and you all gathered outside the room, knocking and shouting—all guaranteed to frighten and confuse a groggy boy. When he opened his eyes—well, you know the rest."

"But we all went into the room together," said Letitia. "Why didn't Carl and I see—"

"Because Janet was the first one in. You mentioned how slowly she opened the door—she had to be sure that Bobby had seen the bear. Bobby screamed—"

"And Janet immediately turned on the lights!"

"Exactly. And hung the clothes back on the door while your attention was on Bobby. Since then Janet hasn't had a chance to paint over the bear because you've had the room locked and the key in your possession."

"It's—it's ghastly," said Letitia slowly. "But I just can't ignore the bear on the door. What now, Leonard? The police?"

He nodded. "They should be here when she gets back. Right now, except for the bear on the door, the case against Janet isn't too strong. What we know and what can be proved in court are two different things. But I think Paul Roberts and his men will come up with more evidence once they're pointed in the right direction."

"Whatever you say, Leonard. Only—"

"Only what?"

"*Why?* After all these years why would Janet do such a thing?"

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"Oh, Lettie, Lettie, you must be the most generous person in the world. That's why."

"I don't understand."

"While I was waiting up here, I called your lawyer about your will—the one you never changed in favor of your grandson."

"Yes, what about it?"

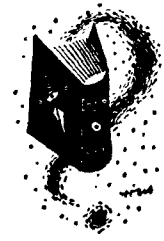
"Lawyer Simms is an old friend of mine. We went to school together. Still, he was a little reluctant to discuss your personal affairs. I finally talked him into it."

"I still don't see—"

"You told me that everything was going to charity 'aside from a few small bequests.' Isn't that the way you put it?"

"Yes, but—"

"Really, Lettie, we working people don't consider 'Fifty thousand dollars to Miss Janet Ramsey for faithful services' to be a small bequest."



CURRENT MYSTERY AND SUSPENSE HARDCOVERS

AUTHOR	TITLE	PUBLISHER	PRICE	ON SALE
Henle, Theda O.	DEATH FILES FOR CONGRESS	Vanguard Press	$ 5.95	9/71
Thomson, June	NOT ONE OF US	Harper & Row	5.95	10/6
Webb, Jean Francis	ROSES IN A HAUNTED GARDEN	McKay-Washburn	5.95	11/1
White, R. J.	A SECONDHAND TOMB	Harper & Row	5.95	10/27

Titles and Data Supplied by the Publishers

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THE JURY BOX

by JOHN DICKSON CARR

Again, for various reasons, let's omit preliminary remarks. We face a tricky lot this time.

Tricky, did I say? Yes, but no great disappointment. Though as a rule fortune will deal me at least one first-class detective novel for my lead, it has not happened here. On the other hand, I can recommend two mystery-adventure items of high-voltage pace and excitement, with different sorts of efforts to back them up. Well, we have fared much worse.

Jink, by Thomas Patrick McMahon (Simon and Schuster, $4.95) is nobody's name. In technical language it means "violent evasive action and reaction to avoid extreme hazard from enemy fire." Much action of all sorts must be undertaken by Major John McKendrick, that sympathetic Air Force officer against whom all circumstances conspire.

Returning to Florida after more than a year's duty in Thailand, McKendrick finds his wife and three children mysteriously missing without a word. Authority, summoned for help, has almost decided that innocent McKendrick and Anne must be part of a jewel-smuggling ring—or worse.

McKendrick won't take it; he fights. Figuratively, then, he is under fire not only from some sinister opposing force but from those on Our Side who seem as malignant as the enemy. After many twists and turns the battle ceases to be figurative; we sweep to a surprise finale and that spectacular confrontation in the sky. Don't jink with this one; grab it and read.

Despite its unpromising title, Donald Mackenzie's *Sleep Is for the Rich* (Houghton Mifflin, $5.95) proves to be one of the year's best: paradoxically, a crime story of such hypnotic charm that it will hold you pliant to its every shading of mood through comedy, thrill, irony, and grimness to a triumphant end.

Our protagonist, Paul Henderson, literate and civilized jewel-thief from Canada, after a disastrous marriage has been left in England with a delightful seven-year-old daughter named

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Sophie. Though he wants to go straight for Sophie's sake, it's not to be. Fat-cat Harry Chalice, crude but clever mastermind at all dirty work, rich and retired but still ambitious, meditates a last coup which shall make Chalice's name ring through history. Aided by his murderous young hanger-on, Crying Eddie, he plans the biggest jewel robbery of all time.

At an estate in Switzerland Marika Bergen, once world skating star, now an aging blonde with her fabulous collection of gems, will entertain a house party whose principal guests are famous women with famous gem collections of their own. To strip that party of its every valuable, reasons Mastermind Chalice, he needs Paul Henderson's expertise and gentlemanly manners. So Chalice tempts, applying pressure. One good haul, Henderson knows, will assure his daughter's future. Greatly tempted, he yields and joins in.

Then we're at it—pull thief, pull devil—amid characters as diverse as an alluring German baroness and the blackmailer called Greasy George. We like Paul Henderson; greatly we hope he won't come to harm, in spite of self-righteous maxims that the wrongdoer must suffer. But never mind; be of good heart and don't worry; the author likes him too.

In *The Golden Ball and Other Stories*, by Agatha Christie (Dodd, Mead, $5.95), we have fifteen tales written by Dame Agatha in her exuberant youth but never before republished under this title. In theme ranging from practical crime to twilight and the unseen, each story is good and all together are valuable as they show the burgeoning of that exhaustless dexterity of invention with which the author was to dazzle us in subsequent years.

Whether you are familiar or unfamiliar with these tales, dip into them. You can't go wrong with Agatha Christie.

With *A Catalogue of Crime*, by Jacques Barzun and Wendell Hertig Taylor (Harper & Row, $18.95), two connoisseurs have provided what they rightly subtitle their 'Reader's Guide to the Literature of Mystery, Detection, & Related Genres.'

In this comprehensive study you will find every species: the novel, the short story, the fact-crime study, lined up for shrewd appraisal. The authors are here too, each of us, with strengths examined as well as faults or blunders too. If the critics' judgment sometimes grows pompous, it is fair, honest, and sympathetic. Cherish this book; it deserves an honored place on your shelves.

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a mystery story by

AGATHA CHRISTIE

One of Agatha Christie's rare stories outside the field of detection and crime (although there are crimes on earth not dreamt of in our philosophy). . .the story of a medium—the most wonderful medium in Paris, in France, in the world—and of danger and pain, but mostly of fear. . .

THE LAST SEANCE

by AGATHA CHRISTIE

Raoul Daubreuil crossed the Seine humming a little tune to himself. He was a good-looking young Frenchman of about 32, with a fresh-colored face and a little black mustache. By profession he was an engineer.

In due course he reached the Cardonet and turned in at the door of No. 17. The concierge looked out from her lair and gave him a grudging "Good morning," to which he replied cheerfully. Then he mounted the stairs to the apartment on the third floor.

As he stood there waiting for his ring at the bell to be answered he hummed once more his little tune. Raoul Daubreuil was feeling particularly cheerful this morning. The door was opened by an elderly Frenchwoman, whose wrinkled face broke into smiles when she saw who the visitor was.

"Good morning, monsieur."

"Good morning, Elise," said Raoul.

He passed into the vestibule, pulling off his gloves as he did so.

"Madame expects me, does she not?" he asked over his shoulder.

"Ah, yes, indeed, monsieur."

Elise shut the front door and turned toward him.

"If Monsieur will go into the little salon, Madame will be with him in a few minutes. At the moment she reposes herself."

Raoul looked up sharply. "Is she not well?"

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"Well!"

Elise gave a snort. She passed in front of Raoul and opened the door of the little salon for him. He went in and she followed him.

"Well!" she continued. "How should she be well, poor lamb? Séances, séances, and always séances! It is not right—not natural, not what the good God intended for us. For me, I say straight out, it is trafficking with the devil."

Raoul patted her on the shoulder reassuringly.

"There, there, Elise," he said soothingly, "do not excite yourself, and do not be too ready to see the devil in everything you do not understand."

Elise shook her head.

"Ah well," she grumbled under her breath, "Monsieur may say what he pleases, I don't like it. Look at Madame, every day she gets whiter and thinner, and the headaches!"

She held up her hands. "Ah, no, it is not good, all this spirit business. Spirits indeed! All the good spirits are in paradise, and the others are in purgatory."

"Your view of the life after death is refreshingly simple, Elise," said Raoul as he dropped into a chair.

The old woman drew herself up. "I am a good Catholic, monsieur."

She crossed herself, went toward the door, then paused, her hand on the handle.

"Afterwards when you are married, monsieur," she said pleadingly, "it will not continue—all this?"

Raoul smiled at her affectionately.

"You are a good faithful creature, Elise," he said, "and devoted to your mistress. Have no fear, once she is my wife, all this 'spirit business,' as you call it, will cease. For Madame Daubreuil there will be no more seances."

Elise's face broke into smiles.

"Is it true what you say?" she asked eagerly.

The other nodded gravely.

"Yes," he said, speaking almost more to himself than to her. "Yes, all this must end. Simone has a wonderful gift and she has used it freely, but now she has done her part. As you have justly observed, Elise, day by day she gets whiter and thinner. The life of a medium is a particularly trying and arduous one, involving a terrible nervous strain. All the same, Elise, your mistress is the most wonderful medium in Paris—more, in France. People from all over the world come to her because they know that with her there is no trickery, no deceit."

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Elise gave a snort of contempt.

"Deceit! Ah, no, indeed. Madame could not deceive a newborn babe if she tried."

"She is an angel," said the young Frenchman with fervor. "And I—I shall do everything a man can do to make her happy. You believe that?"

Elise drew herself up, and spoke with a certain simple dignity.

"I have served Madame for many years, monsieur. With all respect I may say that I love her. If I did not believe that you adored her as she deserves to be adored—*eh bien*, monsieur! I should be willing to tear you limb from limb."

Raoul laughed. "Bravo, Elise! You are a faithful friend, and you must approve of me now that I have told you Madame is going to give up the spirits."

He expected the old woman to receive this pleasantry with a laugh, but somewhat to his surprise she remained grave.

"Supposing, monsieur," she said hesitatingly, "the spirits will not give her up?"

Raoul stared at her. "Eh! What do you mean?"

"I said," repeated Elise, "supposing the spirits will not give her up?"

"I thought you didn't believe in the spirits, Elise?"

"No more I do," said Elise stubbornly. "It is foolish to believe in them. All the same—"

"Well?"

"It is difficult for me to explain, monsieur. You see, me, I always thought that these mediums, as they call themselves, were just clever cheats who imposed on the poor souls who had lost their dear ones. But Madame is not like that. Madame is good. Madame is honest, and—"

She lowered her voice and spoke in a tone of awe. "Things happen. It is not trickery, things happen, and that is why I am afraid. For I am sure of this, monsieur, it is not right. It is against nature and *le bon Dieu*, and somebody will have to pay."

Raoul got up from his chair and patted her on the shoulder.

"Calm yourself, my good Elise," he said, smiling. "See, I will give you some good news. Today is the last of these séances; after today there will be no more."

"There is one today, then?" asked the old woman suspiciously.

"The last, Elise, the last."

Elise shook her head disconsolately. "Madame is not fit—" she began.

But her words were interrupted. The door opened and a tall fair woman came in. She

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was slender and graceful, with the face of a Botticelli Madonna. Raoul's face lighted up, and Elise withdrew quickly and discreetly.

"Simone!"

He took both her long white hands in his and kissed each in turn. She murmured his name very softly.

"Raoul, my dear one."

Again he kissed her hands and then looked intently into her face.

"Simone, how pale you are! Elise told me you were resting; you are not ill, my beloved?"

"No, not ill—" she hesitated.

He led her to the sofa and sat down on it beside her.

"But tell me then."

The medium smiled faintly. "You will think me foolish," she murmured.

"I? Think you foolish? Never."

Simone withdrew her hand from his grasp. She sat perfectly still for a few moments gazing down at the carpet. Then she spoke in a low, hurried voice.

"I am afraid, Raoul."

He waited, expecting her to go on; but when she did not he said encouragingly, "Yes, afraid of what?"

"Just afraid . . . that is all."

"But—"

He looked at her in perplexity, and she answered the look quickly.

"Yes, it is absurd, isn't it, and yet I feel just that. Afraid, nothing more. I don't know what of, or why, but all the time I am possessed with the idea that something terrible is going to happen to me."

She stared out in front of her. Raoul put an arm gently round her.

"My dearest," he said, "come, you must not give way. I know what it is, the strain, Simone, the strain of a medium's life. All you need is rest—rest and quiet."

She looked at him gratefully. "Yes, Raoul, you are right. That is what I need, rest and quiet."

She closed her eyes and leaned back a little against his arm.

"And happiness," murmured Raoul in her ear.

His arm drew her closer. Simone, her eyes still closed, drew a deep breath.

"Yes," she murmured, "yes. When your arms are round me I feel safe. I forget my life—the terrible life of a medium. You know much, Raoul, but even you do not know all it means."

He felt her body grow rigid in his embrace. Her eyes opened again, staring in front of her.

"One sits in the cabinet in the darkness, waiting, and the darkness is terrible, Raoul, for it is the darkness of emptiness,

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of nothingness. Deliberately one gives oneself up to be lost in it. After that one knows nothing, one feels nothing, but at last there comes the slow painful return, the awakening out of sleep, but so tired—so terribly tired."

"I know," murmured Raoul, "I know."

"So tired," murmured Simone again. Her whole body seemed to droop as she repeated the words.

"But you are wonderful, Simone."

He took her hands in his, trying to rouse her to share his enthusiasm.

"You are unique—the greatest medium the world has ever known."

She shook her head, smiling a little at that.

"Yes, yes," Raoul insisted. He drew two letters from his pocket.

"See here, from Professor Roche of the Salpetriere, and this one from Dr. Genir at Nancy, both imploring that you will continue to sit for them occasionally."

"Ah, no!"

Simone sprang suddenly to her feet.

"I will not, I will not. It is to be all finished, all done with. You promised me, Raoul."

Raoul stared at her in astonishment as she stood wavering, facing him almost like a creature at bay. He got up and took her hand.

"Yes, yes," he said. "Certainly it is finished, that is understood. But I am so proud of you, Simone, that is why I mentioned those letters."

She threw him a swift glance of suspicion.

"It is not that you will ever want me to sit again?"

"No, no," said Raoul, "unless perhaps you yourself would care to, just occasionally for these old friends—"

But she interrupted him, speaking excitedly. "No, no, never again. There is danger. I tell you I can feel it, great danger."

She clasped her hands on her forehead, then walked across to the window.

"Promise me never again," she said in a quieter voice over her shoulder.

Raoul followed her and put his arms round her shoulders.

"My dear one," he said tenderly, "I promise you after today you shall never sit again."

He felt the sudden start she gave.

"Today," she murmured. "Ah, yes, I had forgotten Madame Exe."

Raoul looked at his watch. "She is due any minute now; but perhaps, Simone, if you do not feel well—"

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Simone hardly seemed to be listening to him; she was following her own train of thought.

"She is—a strange woman, Raoul, a very strange woman. Do you know, I have almost a horror of her."

"Simone!"

There was reproach in his voice, and she was quick to feel it.

"Yes, yes, I know, you are like all Frenchmen, Raoul. To you a mother is sacred and it is unkind of me to feel like that about her when she grieves so for her lost child. But—I cannot explain it, she is so big and black, and her hands—have you ever noticed her hands, Raoul? Great big strong hands, as strong as a man's. Ah!"

She gave a little shiver and closed her eyes. Raoul withdrew his arm and spoke almost coldly.

"I really cannot understand you, Simone. Surely you, a woman, should have nothing but sympathy for another woman, a mother bereft of her only child."

Simone made a gesture of impatience. "Ah, it is you who do not understand, my friend! One cannot help these things. The first moment I saw her I felt—"

She flung her hand out. "Fear! You remember, it was a long time before I would consent to sit for her? I felt sure in some way she would bring me misfortune."

Raoul shrugged. "Whereas, in actual fact, she brought you the exact opposite," he said dryly. "All the sittings have been attended with marked success. The spirit of the little Amelie was able to control you at once, and the materializations have really been striking. Professor Roche ought really to have been present at the last one."

"Materializations," said Simone in a low voice. "Tell me, Raoul—you know that I know nothing of what takes place while I am in the trance—are the materializations really so wonderful?"

He nodded enthusiastically. "At the first few sittings the figure of the child was visible in a kind of nebulous haze," he explained, "but at the last séance—"

"Yes?"

He spoke very softly. "Simone, the child that stood there was an actual living child of flesh and blood. I even touched her—but seeing that the touch was acutely painful to you I would not permit Madame Exe to do the same. I was afraid that her self-control might break down, and that some harm to you might result."

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Simone turned again toward the window.

"I was terribly exhausted when I woke," she murmured. "Raoul, are you sure—are you really sure that all this is right? You know what dear old Elise thinks, that I am trafficking with the devil?" She laughed rather uncertainly.

"You know what I believe," said Raoul gravely. "In the handling of the unknown there must always be danger, but the cause is a noble one, for it is the cause of Science. All over the world there have been martyrs to Science, pioneers who have paid the price so that others may follow safely in their footsteps. For ten years now you have worked for Science at the cost of a terrific nervous strain. Now your part is done, and from today onward you are free to be happy."

She smiled at him affectionately, her calm restored. Then she glanced quickly up at the clock.

"Madame Exe is late," she murmured. "She may not come."

"I think she will," said Raoul. "Your clock is a little fast, Simone."

Simone moved about the room, rearranging an ornament here and there.

"I wonder who she is, this Madame Exe?" she observed. "Where she comes from, who her people are? It is strange that we know nothing about her."

Raoul shrugged. "Most people remain incognito if possible when they come to a medium," he observed. "It is an elementary precaution."

"I suppose so," agreed Simone listlessly.

A little china vase she was holding slipped from her fingers and broke to pieces on the tiles of the fireplace. She turned sharply on Raoul.

"You see," she murmured, "I am not myself. Raoul, would you think me very—very cowardly if I told Madame Exe I could not sit today?"

His look of pained astonishment made her redden.

"You promised, Simone—" he began gently.

She backed against the wall. "I won't do it, Raoul. I won't do it!"

And again that glance of his, tenderly reproachful, made her wince.

"It is not of the money I am thinking, Simone, though you must realize that the money this woman has offered you for a last sitting is enormous, simply enormous."

She interrupted him defiantly. "There are things that matter more than money."

"Certainly there are," he agreed warmly. "That is just

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what I am saying. Consider—this woman is a mother, a mother who has lost her only child. If you are not really ill, if it is only a whim on your part—you can deny a rich woman a caprice, but can you deny a mother one last sight of her child?"

The medium flung her hands out despairingly.

"Oh, you torture me," she murmured. "All the same you are right. I will do as you wish, but I know now what I am afraid of—it is the word 'mother.' "

"Simone!"

"There are certain primitive elementary forces, Raoul. Most of them have been destroyed by civilization, but motherhood stands where it stood at the beginning. Animals—human beings, they are all the same. A mother's love for her child is like nothing else in the world. It knows no law, no pity, it dares all things and crushes down remorselessly all that stands in its path."

She stopped, panting a little, then turned to him with a quick, disarming smile. "I am foolish today, Raoul. I know it."

He took her hands in his. "Lie down for a minute or two," he urged. "Rest till she comes."

"Very well." She smiled at him and left the room. Raoul remained lost in thought, then he strode to the door, opened it, and crossed the little hall. He went into a room on the other side of it, a sitting room very much like the one he had left, but at one end was an alcove with a big armchair set in it. Heavy black velvet curtains were arranged so that they could be pulled across the alcove.

Elise was busy arranging the room. Close to the alcove she had set two chairs and a small round table. On the table was a tambourine, a horn, and some paper and pencils.

"The last time," murmured Elise with grim satisfaction. "Ah, monsieur, I wish it were over and done with."

The sharp ting of an electric bell sounded.

"There she is, that great *gendarme* of a woman," continued the old servant. "Why can't she go and pray decently for her little one's soul in a church, and burn a candle to Our Blessed Lady? Does not the good God know what is best for us?"

"Answer the bell, Elise," said Raoul peremptorily.

She threw him a look, but obeyed. In a minute she returned ushering in the visitor.

"I will tell my mistress you are here, madame."

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Raoul came forward to shake hands with Madame Exe. Simone's words floated back to his memory.

"So big and so black."

She was a big woman, and the heavy black of French mourning seemed almost exaggerated in her case. Her voice when she spoke was very deep.

"I fear I am a little late, monsieur."

"A few minutes only," said Raoul, smiling. "Madame Simone is lying down. I am sorry to say she is far from well, very nervous and overwrought."

Her hand, which she was just withdrawing, closed on his suddenly like a vice.

"But she will sit?" she demanded sharply.

"Oh, yes, madame."

Madame Exe gave a sigh of relief and sank into a chair, loosening one of the heavy black veils that floated round her.

"Ah, monsieur!" she murmured, "you cannot imagine, you cannot conceive the wonder and the joy of these seances to me! My little one! My Amelie! To see her, to hear her, even—perhaps—yes, perhaps to be even able to stretch out my hand and touch her."

Raoul spoke quickly. "Madame Exe—how can I explain?—on no account must you do anything except under my express directions, otherwise there is the gravest danger."

"Danger to me?"

"No, madame," said Raoul, "to the medium. You must understand that the phenomena that occur are explained by Science in a certain way. I will put the matter very simply, using no technical terms. A spirit, to manifest itself, has to use the actual physical substance of the medium. You have seen the vapor issuing from the lips of the medium. This finally condenses and is built up into the physical semblance of the spirit's dead body. But this ectoplasm we believe to be the actual substance of the medium. We hope to prove this some day by careful weighing and testing—but the great difficulty is the danger and pain which attends the medium on any handling of the phenomena. Were anyone to seize hold of the materialization roughly, the death of the medium might result."

Madame Exe had listened to him with close attention.

"That is very interesting, monsieur. Tell me, will there not be a time come when the materialization advances so far that it shall be capable of detachment from its parent, the medium?"

"That is a fantastic speculation, madame."

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She persisted. "But, on the facts, not impossible?"

"Quite impossible today."

"But perhaps in the future?"

He was saved from answering, for at that moment Simone entered. She looked languid and pale, but had evidently regained control of herself. She came forward and shook hands with Madame Exe, though Raoul noticed the faint shiver that passed through her as she did so.

"I regret, madame, to hear that you are indisposed," said Madame Exe.

"It is nothing," said Simone rather brusquely. "Shall we begin?"

She went to the alcove and sat down in the armchair. Suddenly Raoul in his turn felt a wave of fear pass over him.

"You are not strong enough," he exclaimed. "We had better cancel the séance. Madame Exe will understand."

"Monsieur!"

Madame Exe rose indignantly.

"Yes, yes, it is better not, I am sure of it."

"Madame Simone promised me one last sitting."

"That is so," agreed Simone quietly, "and I am prepared to carry out my promise."

"I hold you to it, madame," said the other woman.

"I do not break my word," said Simone coldly. "Do not fear, Raoul," she added gently, "after all, it is for the last time—the last time, thank God."

At a sign from her Raoul drew the heavy black curtains across the alcove. He also pulled the curtains of the window so that the room was in semi-obscurity. He indicated one of the chairs to Madame Exe and prepared to take the other. Madame Exe, however, hesitated.

"You will pardon me, monsieur, but—you understand I believe absolutely in your integrity and in that of Madame Simone. All the same, so that my testimony may be the more valuable, I took the liberty of bringing this with me."

From her handbag she drew a length of fine cord.

"Madame!" cried Raoul. "This is an insult!"

"A precaution."

"I repeat, it is an insult!"

"I don't understand your objection, monsieur," said Madame Exe coldly. "If there is no trickery you have nothing to fear."

Raoul laughed scornfully. "I can assure you that I have nothing to fear, madame. Bind me hand and foot if you will."

His speech did not produce the effect he hoped, for Madame Exe murmured unemo-

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ionally, "Thank you, mon-eur," and advanced upon him vith her roll of cord.

Suddenly Simone from be-ind the curtain gave a cry.

"No, no, Raoul, don't let her o it."

Madame Exe laughed deri-vely. "Madame is afraid," she bserved sarcastically.

"Yes, I am afraid."

"Remember what you are aying, Simone," cried Raoul. Madame Exe is apparently nder the impression that we re charlatans."

"I must make sure," said Madame Exe grimly.

She went methodically bout her task, binding Raoul ecurely to his chair.

"I must congratulate you on our knots, madame," he bserved ironically when she ad finished. "Are you satisfied ow?"

Madame Exe did not reply. She walked round the room xamining the paneling of the valls closely. Then she locked he door leading into the hall, nd removing the key, returned o her chair.

"Now," she said in an ndescribable voice. "I am eady."

The minutes passed. From ehind the curtain the sound of Simone's breathing became eavier and more stertorous. Then it died away altogether, to be succeeded by a series of moans. Then again there was silence for a little while, broken by the sudden clattering of the tambourine. The horn was caught up from the table and dashed to the ground. Ironic laughter was heard. The curtains of the alcove seemed to have been pulled back a little, the medium's figure was just visible through the opening, her head fallen forward on her breast.

Suddenly Madame Exe drew in her breath sharply. A ribbon-like stream of mist was issuing from the medium's mouth. It condensed and began gradually to assume a shape, the shape of a little child.

"Amelie! My little Amelie!"

The hoarse whisper came from Madame Exe. The hazy figure condensed still further. Raoul stared almost incredulously. Never had there been a more successful materialization. Now, surely, it was a real child, a real flesh-and-blood child standing there.

"Maman!" The soft childish voice spoke.

"My child!" cried Madame Exe. "My child!" She half rose from her seat.

"Be careful, madame," cried Raoul warningly.

The materialization came hesitatingly through the curtains. It was a child. She stood

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there, her arms held out.

"Maman!"

"Ah!" cried Madame Exe. Again she half rose from her seat.

"Madame," cried Raoul, alarmed, "the medium—"

"I must touch her," cried Madame Exe hoarsely.

She moved a step forward.

"For God's sake, madame, control yourself," cried Raoul.

He was really alarmed now.

"Sit down at once."

"My little one, I must touch her."

"Madame, I command you, sit down!"

He was writhing desperately with his bonds, but Madame Exe had done her work well; he was helpless. A terrible sense of impending disaster swept over him.

"In the name of God, madame, sit down!" he shouted. "Remember the medium!"

Madame Exe paid no attention to him. She was like a woman transformed. Ecstasy and delight showed plainly in her face. Her outstretched hand touched the little figure that stood in the opening of the curtains. A terrible moan came from the medium.

"My God!" cried Raoul. "This is terrible. The medium—"

Madame Exe turned on him with a harsh laugh.

"What do I care for your medium?" she cried. "I want my child."

"You are mad!"

"My child, I tell you. Mine! My own flesh and blood! My little one come back to me from the dead, alive and breathing."

Raoul opened his lips, but no words would come. She was terrible, this woman! Remorseless, savage, absorbed by her own passion. The baby lips parted, and for the third time the same word echoed: "Maman!"

"Come then, my little one," cried Madame Exe.

With a sharp gesture she caught up the child in her arms. From behind the curtains came a long-drawn scream of anguish.

"Simone!" cried Raoul.

He was aware vaguely of Madame Exe rushing past him, of the unlocking of the door, of retreating footsteps down the stairs.

From behind the curtain there still sounded the terrible, high, long-drawn scream, such a scream as Raoul had never heard. It died away in a horrible kind of gurgle. Then there came the thud of a body falling.

Raoul was working like a maniac to free himself from his bonds. In his frenzy he accomplished the impossible, snapping the rope by sheer

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strength. As he struggled to his feet Elise rushed in, gasping, "Madame!"

"Simone!" cried Raoul.

Together they rushed forward and pulled the curtain. Raoul staggered back.

"My God!" he murmured. "Red—all red."

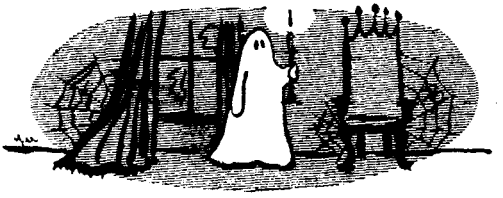
Elise's voice came beside him, harsh and shaking.

"So Madame is dead. It is ended. But tell me, monsieur, what has happened. Why is Madame all shrunken away—why is she half her usual size? What has been happening here?"

"I do not know," said Raoul.

His voice rose to a scream.

"I do not know. I do not know. But I think—I am going mad . . . Simone! Simone!"



CRIMINALIMERICK

DAMSEL IN DISTRESS

by D. R. BENSEN

The best tales of Agatha Christie
Are set where the weather is misty;
They're all totally fair,
As the clues are all there,
If at times unforgivably twisty.

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Another parody of an EQ "dying message" short-short—a form and technique that seem to inspire more and more parodies!

DEATH OF A ROCK-'N'-ROLLER

by JOHN ABBOTT

L Ricque Ween and his father, Inspector Richard Ween, were sitting in the living room of L.'s sumptuous apartment, sipping Dubonnet and murmuring appreciatively. L., lost in thought, was suddenly aware that the old man had said something.

"What's that, dad?" L. asked.

"Nothing, son. I was just murmuring appreciatively."

"Oh." L. looked in the large ornate mirror, watching his father reflectively.

"Dad, how long has it been?" he asked.

The Inspector raised an eyebrow.

L. sighed. "We haven't been on a trip to Wrongsville, for criminal or sentimental reasons, in over a year."

Inspector Ween had wedged a nasal spray into his left nostril. He inhaled mightily, his eyes rolling heavenward.

"You're right, son. It's been too quiet. I don't like it."

As if to confirm the old man's apprehension, a cacophony of noise erupted in the hallway outside the Ween apartment—glass shattering, metal clanging, and vague tearing noises. L. rushed to the door which was flung open before he could reach it. Sergeant Feely, grinning sheepishly, slipped inside and placed a warning finger to his lips.

"Nothing to worry about, maestro," he said. "New couple just moved in down the hall. The neighbors came around with the Welcome Wagon but had a little trouble getting it up the narrow stairway."

"Is that all?" L. relaxed a bit, then noticed the telegram in Feely's hand. "For me?"

"Yeah, sorry, maestro. Here. But how'd you know it was for you?"

L. smiled cryptically. "I saw my name on it and followed a hunch."

They joined the Inspector in L.'s sumptuous living room. L. supplied the grateful Feely with a cold beer, then tore open the

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envelope eagerly. As he scanned the contents, Feely took a noisy swallow of beer and belched behind a huge hand. Inspector Ween said something indistinct.

"What's that, sir?" Feely asked.

"Nothing, Sergeant. I was just murmuring appreciatively."

"Oh."

"Dad," L. cried excitedly, "listen to this." He read:

URGENTLY REQUEST YOUR ASSISTANCE IN BIZARRE MURDER CASE STOP CLUES ASSEMBLED FOR YOUR INTERPRETATION STOP WILL MEET THE 9:45 PM ARRIVAL OF WRONGSVILLE EXPRESS
CHIEF OF POLICE
CHESTER

L. looked from his father to Sergeant Feely. "Well, gentlemen?"

"Count me in," Feely grinned.

"With you, son," the Inspector chirped.

"Then there's no time to lose," L. cautioned. "To Penn Station, and, Sergeant, if you will, get a late edition of the Wrongsville *Clarion*. It may contain details of the recent homicide."

In a Pullman seat on the Express, L. and his father hunched over the Wrongsville *Clarion*.

On page one the news of the killing had supplanted Vietnam, inflation, and the seventh wedding of a Hollywood star.

The murder victim was the famous rock-'n'-roll singer, Steve N. Foster, who had just returned to his hometown of Wrongsville after a smash European tour which had netted him more than a million dollars. Posing with the mayor on the City Hall steps, he threw cascades of kisses to the squealing teen-agers who strained in ecstasy against the police barricades. After the reception he had gone to Wrongsville's leading (and only) hotel and secured the Georgian Suite, a group of rooms normally assigned to such dignitaries as the state poultry inspector.

Once ensconced, Steve N. Foster set up his microphone, plugged in two amplifiers, and exploded in wall-bulging vocalizations of his latest gold-platter hits.

The hotel manager, Ralph Dudar, had gone up to the suite to protest against the din and had been promptly propelled from the rooms by the unsympathetic Mr. Foster.

A short while later, a retired Southern gentleman, Campton La Deez, was seen entering the suite of Steve N. Foster. Their

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voices rose in heated, shouting argument that could be heard in the next room. The word "money" resounded again and again. Finally Campton La Deez left in high dudgeon, screaming, "That insolent young whelp!"

This was followed by a prolonged silence which worried the manager of the hotel and prompted him to knock at the door of Steve N. Foster to see if all was well. Receiving no reply, he used a passkey and entered the suite. He found the young singer slumped over a writing desk, bleeding from an orifice in his right temple, and quite dead. He told the reporters that he then called the police, touching nothing in the room but the telephone. The *Clarion* account finished by stating that the police had found the Georgian Suite ransacked and that Steve N. Foster, though mortally wounded, had managed to scribble a short note which, while not exactly naming the killer, pointed unmistakably to his identity, and that Campton La Deez was being held for the murder of Steve N. Foster.

L. looked at his father who was sipping coffee from a plastic container and murmuring appreciatively.

"Dad," he said, "that dying message is the crux of the case. I feel it in my bones."

The Inspector snorted. "But why such an indirect note, son? Why not just come out and name the killer?"

"Because," L. explained, "Foster may have heard his assailant ransacking the suite and may have been fearful the killer would come back to search the body, thus seeing the message. Foster's hope was to name his killer in such an obscure way that the killer wouldn't recognize the dying message as a clue."

The Inspector grunted. "Maybe. We'll soon know, son. Here's Wrongsville."

Two men stepped from the shadows of the depot and walked toward the Weens.

Chief of Police Chester, the taller of the two men, greeted the Weens effusively. "Glad you could come! I'm the new Chief. Chester's my name and this—" indicating his companion "—is my deputy, Nat Dillon. These are the famous Weens, father and son. Shake hands, boys."

Inspector Ween extended his hand readily, pumping the hand of the man next to him.

"No, no, dad," protested L., freeing himself with difficulty, "you're supposed to shake with Chief Chester."

The amenities finally completed, they were driven in two police cars to the Wrongsville hotel.

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L.'s first request was an interview with the manager. Mr. Dudar, obviously under a strain, answered questions in a fretful, distracted manner.

"You found the body, Mr. Dudar?"

"Yes. A great shock. All that blood and then that strange message. I tried to fathom it but it made no sense to me. Later, when the police arrived, they saw the meaning of it and made their arrest accordingly."

L. considered this. "I understand you made an earlier visit to the suite?"

Dudar drew himself up. "I certainly did. Such a racket he was making. You can't imagine. I know nothing about music, Mr. Ween, but as a hotel man I *do* know about noise—and that was noise. To me, music and noise are synonymous and I told Mr. Foster my feelings in the matter. That was when he—er—ejected me."

L. turned to the Chief. "That dying message. Do you have it with you?"

"The original is at the lab, but I have a copy. Here."

Inspector Ween and Feely, crowding in to look over L.'s shoulder, read:

De Camptown ladies sing dis song,

De Camptown race-track five miles long

"Sufferin' catfish," Feely exploded. "It's just two lines from that song—let's see—yeah, *Camptown Races.* Right, maestro?"

Chief of Police Chester answered him. "Right. And look at the second and third words of that first line—*Camptown ladies.* Foster was telling us that Campton La Deez was his killer. Wouldn't you say so, Mr. Ween?"

L., leery, parried the question with one of his own. "This Campton La Deez, what is his profession?"

Chester laughed. "Well, he calls himself a musical talent scout. Claims he discovered Steve N. Foster years ago and signed him to a contract, and that Foster jumped to sign with World Wide Agency. La Deez wanted settlement on the alleged contract and that's what all the shouting over money was about."

L. nodded vigorously. "I thought so. La Deez knows music."

"So what?" Chester was becoming a bit nettled. "Granted La Deez knows music, the message points straight to him and—"

"No," L. interrupted sharply. "The message points *away* from him and *toward* someone else. Toward the real killer, who would not understand the hidden implication of the

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message and who lied when he said—grab him, Sergeant!"

Inspector Ween had been buffeted aside by the killer's dash to the door. The collision gave Feely the time he needed. Moving with surprising speed for a big man, he collared the murderer at the door, his vise-like arms pinioning the man as if he were in a straitjacket.

Chester and Nat Dillon had watched the action in a state of stupefaction. Chester recovered first. "You mean the killer is the hotel manager?"

L. nodded somberly.

"You can't prove it," Dudar yelled.

"Ah, but I can," L. corrected softly. "You stated that when you found the body of Foster slumped over the writing desk you touched nothing but the telephone."

"So?"

"You then said you tried to decipher the dying message left by Foster." L. paused dramatically, his silvery eyes gleaming. "If Foster wrote the dying message at his desk and then was found by you slumped over the desk, and therefore over the message, how did you see the message and read it without lifting—and touching—the body?"

The hotel manager sagged in Feely's grasp.

"Good work, son," Inspector Ween beamed. "But what about the message? How did it point to the real killer?"

"If La Deez were the killer, Foster had only to write out the first line of that song and hope we'd see the implication; the second line would have been superfluous. But Foster used his ebbing strength to write *both* lines—so obviously *both* were necessary to give us the clue to the killer's name."

"How's that, L.?"

"No musician worth his salt would write out the two lines of that song without including, *between the lines*, the familiar refrain that is repeated throughout the song. Foster omitted that refrain purposely—to draw our attention to its absence. He knew that the killer, being nonmusical, would undoubtedly fail to note its absence."

"Refrain?" The Inspector, Feely, and the others exchanged puzzled glances.

L. clutched Deputy Dillon by the sleeve. "Sing along with me, won't you?"

Before that startled person could reply, L., in his scratchy tenor, sang out, *"De Camptown ladies sing dis song—"*

He squeezed Deputy Dillon who looked blankly at the group for a moment; then, brightening, he tilted his head to L. and baritoned: *"Doo-dah! doo-dah!"*

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A companion piece to Mr. Abbott's parody... both the parody and the real McQueen have what might be called "artistic themes"—Mr. Abbott's musical, EQ's literary; and both have "dying messages"—or variants thereof...

DEATH OF A PAWNBROKER

by ELLERY QUEEN

It is doubtful if the master who created Baghdad-on-the-Subway ever produced a more wonderful entertainment than the tale of Uncle Malachi. The atmosphere is rich and twisted, the subject likewise, and the story full of sentiment and irony. It even has a surprise ending.

Uncle Malachi was born, he lived, and he died under the rusty shadows of the Third Avenue "El." Because he was a pawnbroker and owned the rickety, peeling old building in which he worked and lived, he was said to be Wealthy. Because he was an old crosspatch who distrusted banks and lived like a mouse, he was said to be a Miser. And since his one notable passion was the collecting of books—not rare books, or first editions, or books in perfect condition, but any books in any condition—he was said to be Odd.

It was all true—he was rich, he was a miser, and he was odd; but there was more to it than that. His riches came from selling real estate—Manhattan real estate—which his great-grandfather had bought; he was a miser, because all pawnbrokers are born accumulators; and his oddness lay not in the collecting of books but in the reading of them.

Books swarmed like honey bees over his pawnshop and living quarters upstairs, which consisted of two impossibly cluttered cubbyholes. Here under jackets of dust could be found the collected works of such as Dumas, Scott, Cooper, Dickens, Poe, Stevenson, Kipling, Conrad, Twain, O. Henry, Doyle, Wells, Jack London—wholesale reading in low-cost lots; and Malachi devoted every moment he could spare from his shop to peering through wavering gaslight at the written treasures of the world. As he aged and as his eyesight

© 1950, 1954 by Ellery Queen; originally titled "Miser's Gold."

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withered, the tempo of his reading increased; for old Malachi had set himself the fine labor of reading every famous book ever printed, beginning with the more exciting ones. A magnificent lunacy, which went with his spidery mind and mystifying sense of humor—he was always grinning, chuckling, or laughing, although no one ever knew what the joke was.

Uncle Malachi's clients were fond of saying that the old miser had no heart, which was a slander. He had a heart—as Dr. Ben Bernard, whose shingle drooped two doors up the street, was prepared to testify—one of the worst hearts, Dr. Ben said, in his experience, a valvular monstrosity and black as the devil's. But Uncle Malachi only cackled. "You're a fool, Doctor!"

Dr. Ben retorted with a sigh that if he were not a fool he would not be practicing medicine on Third Avenue, and he continued to treat the old pawnbroker as if his monthly bills were honored.

As for Eve Warren, she came into Uncle Malachi's life the way most people did. Eve was struggling to keep her little greeting-card shop and circulating library across the street from the hot clutch of her creditors, so she became one of Malachi's clients. When his eyes failed, she felt a stern duty there were few enough book lovers in the world. So sh began dropping in on him afte closing her shop, and she woul read to him.

At first he was suspicious but when he saw that she was fool like Dr. Ben, old Malach grinned, and after that h would even offer her witl antique ceremony a cup o strong hot water which h alleged was tea.

Uncle Malachi's black hear cut its last caper one evenin while Eve was reading *Treasur Island* to him. She looked u from Black Dog's wound an Dr. Livesey's lancet to find th pawnbroker on the floor, hi head between two heaps o books, his face blue-twisted.

"Lawyer . . . witnesses . . . will . . ."

Frankie Pagluighi, who wa serving his first clerkship in Murray Hill law office, wa holding forth on the stoop nex door to a group of neighbors o the latest Supreme Cour decision. Eve screamed to hin what was wanted and then sh raced up the street to Dr. Ben's By the time she and the youn doctor got back, Uncle Mala chi's head was resting on a re buckram set of Richard Hardin Davis and Attorney Pagluigh was kneeling by his side, writin frantically.

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"... all my property, real and personal ... including my hidden cash ... equally between the only human beings ... who have ever shown me Christian charity ..."

Dr. Ben looked up at Eve and shook his head sadly.

"... Eve Warren and Dr. Ben Bernard."

"Oh!" said Eve; and she burst into tears.

Grocer Swendsen, Patrolman Pat Curlihy, and Joe Littman of the dry goods store signed as witnesses, and then Frankie Pagluighi bent over the gasping man and said loudly, "This hidden cash you specify. How much does it amount to?" Old Malachi worked his blue lips, but nothing came out. "Five thousand? Ten thousand?"

"Four million." He managed a whisper. "In ten-thousand-dollar bills."

"Million." The young lawyer swallowed. "Four *million?* Dollars? Where? Where is it? Where did you hide it? Mr. Malachi!"

Uncle Malachi tried to speak.

"Is it in this building?"

"Yes," said the old man in a suddenly clear voice. "Yes—"

But then he came to attention and looked far beyond them, and after a while Dr. Ben said he was dead.

Ellery came into the case not only because puzzles were his caviar, but also because it was clear as an aspic that his two callers were hopelessly gone on each other. Love and buried treasure—who could resist such a dish?

"You're sure it's really $4,000,000 and not four million figments of the old man's imagination, Dr. Bernard?"

But Dr. Ben reassured him. In the pawnshop safe had been found a ledger listing the serial numbers of the 10,000-dollar bills, which various banks had confirmed. And Eve said Uncle Malachi had often made slyly mysterious remarks to her about his "cache of cash"—he was fond of puns and tricks, she said—defying anyone to find it, even though he had hidden it "on the premises." And the fact was she and Dr. Ben had gone over the little building from basement to roof, inside and out, and had found nothing but cobwebs and vermin. It was not a total loss, Eve admitted with a blush, for they had become engaged while digging up the cellar, under the sponsorship of an indignant rat which had sent her howling into Dr. Ben's arms.

"Well, well, we'll see about this," said Ellery delightedly; and he went back to Third Avenue with them.

Sixteen hours later he sank

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into Uncle Malachi's only chair, a betasseled red-plush refugee from some Victorian town-house, and nibbled his thumb. Eve perched disconsolately on Uncle Malachi's bed, and Dr. Ben sat on a pile of books, wedged between *The Complete Works of Bret Harte* and *The Complete Novels of Wilkie Collins.* And the gas jet flamed and danced.

"It isn't as if," said Ellery about an hour later, "it isn't as if you could hide four hundred banknotes in a . . . unless . . ."

"Unless he separated them. One here, one there," said Dr. Ben helpfully. "Four hundred different hiding places."

Eve shook her head. "No, Ben. From hints he dropped to me I'm sure he put them in one place, in a roll."

"Hints," said Ellery. "Hints, Miss Warren?"

"Oh, I don't know—cryptic remarks. About clues and things—"

"Clues!"

"Clues," gasped Eve guiltily. "Oh, dear!"

"He left a *clue?*"

"Think, Eve!" implored Dr. Ben.

"It was right in this room. I was reading to him—"

"Reading what?" Ellery asked sharply.

"Something by Poe . . . oh, yes, *The Purloined Letter.* And Uncle Malachi said—"

"His exact words, if you can recall them!"

"He said: 'Clever rascal, that Dupin. The most obvious place, eh? Very good! Fact is, there's a clue to my hiding place, Evie, and it's in this very room—the clue, I mean, *not* the money.' And he held his sides laughing. 'In the most obvious place imaginable!' He laughed so hard I thought he'd have a heart attack."

"Clue in the most obvious place in this room . . . Books. He must have meant in one of these thousands of books. But which one?"

Ellery stared at Eve. Then he sprang from the chair. "Puns and tricks, you said. Of course . . ." And he began hunting wildly among the mountains and valleys of books, toppling volumes like a landslide. "But he's *got* to be here . . . Why, Doctor. You're sitting on him!"

Dr. Ben leaped from the Uniform Edition on which he had been seated as if it suddenly wiggled.

Ellery dropped to his knees, shuffling through the various books of the set. "Ah!" And he sat down on the floor with one of the volumes, clutching it like a roc's egg.

First he explored the binding with the tip of his nose. Then

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he went through it page by page. Finally he turned back to one of the front pages and read it to himself, mumbling.

When he looked up, Eve and Dr. Ben cried, "Well?"

"I'm going to ask some questions. Kindly refrain from hilarity and answer as if your future depended on it—which it does." Ellery consulted the page. "Is there a potted palm anywhere in or about the premises?"

"Potted palm?" said Dr. Ben feebly.

"No," said Eve, bewildered.

"No potted palm. How about a room with a skylight?"

"Skylight . . ."

"No."

"In that art stuff downstairs—ceramics, statuettes, vases—do you recall any object in the shape of, or illustrated with the picture of, a yellow dog?"

"Now there's a blue horse," began Dr. Ben, "with a chipped—"

"No, Mr. Queen!"

"Bows and arrows? Archery target? Picture or statue of an archer? Or of Cupid? Of a caliph? Or a green door?"

"Not one of those things, Mr. Queen!"

"Clocks," murmured Ellery, glancing again at the book.

"Say," said Dr. Ben. "Dozens of 'em!"

"And I've examined them all," said Ellery, "and none of them conceals the hoard. That being the case," and Ellery got to his feet, smiling, "and Uncle Malachi having been fond of his little joke, only one possibility remains. So that's where he stashed his treasure!"

"Swiping a leaf from Malachi's rule-of-the-obvious," continued Ellery, "in which of these thousands of books could his clue be hidden? Well, what was the nature of his treasure? Four million dollars. Four million—book. And among these standard sets is the complete works of O. Henry. And one of O. Henry's most famous books is entitled . . . *The Four Million.*"

Ellery waved the volume. "I found nothing foreign in the book. Then the clue was in its contents. Obvious development: see Contents Page. And the titles of the various stories? *Tobin's Palm*—so I asked about a potted palm. *The Skylight Room*—but no skylight. *Memoirs of a Yellow Dog*—no yellow dog. *Mammon and the Archer—The Green Door—The Caliph—Cupid and the Clock:* all fizzled. Only one other possibility among the stories, so that must be Malachi's clue to the hiding place of the cash. *Between Rounds.*"

"*Between Rounds,*" said Dr

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Ben, biting his nails. "How the deuce does that tell you anything? Malachi wasn't a prizefighter, or a—"

"But he was," smiled Ellery, "a punster and high priest of the obscurely obvious. Rounds . . . A round is anything that's circular or spherical in shape. What in a pawnshop—in any and every pawnshop!—is spherical and large enough to conceal four hundred banknotes?"

Eve gasped and ran to the front window. From its rusty arm, which pointed accusingly at the Third Avenue "El," hung the ancient emblem of Uncle Malachi's profession.

"If you'll please find me some tools, Doctor, we'll open those three gilt balls!"

CRIMINALIMERICK

DETECTIVE'S LOT

by D. R. BENSEN

The case is uncommonly tricky,
Its course is amorphous and sticky.
It's to Ellery's credit
That he doesn't just shed it
And head for the seashore with Nikki.

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DEPARTMENT OF "FIRST STORIES"

This is the 360th "first story" to be published by Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine . . . a sensitive and probing portrait of Emmy, a farmer's wife . . .

The author, Ellen Arthur, is in her mid-thirties, married to a computer analyst, and they have two children. Ellen Arthur has been writing off and on for as long as she can remember. She took short-story courses from Patricia McGerr (a regular contributor to EQMM) and Robert Knowlton, and "learned more about writing from them than from all the rest" of her formal education.

The author's hobby is music, and she loves to write folk tunes. She also loves sports (bowling and golf, in particular), bridge, and "arguing religion and politics." And oh, yes: her interest in crime stories originated with her father who was a police captain and who "toted me around quite a bit, and on one notable occasion when there were no prisoners, even locked me in a cell". . .

CAL ALWAYS SAID

by ELLEN ARTHUR

Emmy hardly noticed the cry the first time she heard it. The second time, she raised her head to look out the window, but the cluttered yard looked no different to her than it should, so she went back to washing up the noon dishes. Cal told her to clean up good before she came outside.

Her small red knuckles bobbed rhythmically in and out of the dishpan except when she paused to shake the water drops from her hands and lift her skirt to mop off her face. She did this gingerly, taking care not to touch the blue-yellow bruise on her temple. It surely was hot, she thought, for so soon in the spring. Probably on account of the mist rolling in last night. That did always seem to make it hotter.

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In her mind she counted up the things she was supposed to do. There was the stove to clean, the floor to wash up, and the two rabbits to skin. Ugh, the rabbits! She hated that. One time she tried to tell Cal how much she hated it, but he didn't pay no mind.

She heard the sound again and thought it must be Cal yelling at that horse he'd borrowed off Dilby. It occurred to her that he must be working close-by, and for a few minutes afterwards she speeded up her work as if perhaps he might be able to glance up and see her through the window of the cabin.

She wanted to get done quick anyways because she was itching to sit out on the porch. Spring and summer were the best times even when it was hot. Lordy, how she used to love being outdoors when she was a kid! Walking in the deep woods was best of all, searching out the small animals with the sharp pointy faces. She liked to puzzle over what they might be thinking. She could lose all track of time doing that. Plenty of times she didn't get on to school at all and got in trouble.

And once, when she was eleven, she got shot in the leg by a man hunting squirrel, and her Pop said she had to keep shut of the woods. That hurt worse than getting shot, and even worse than the doctoring. Afterwhile Pop forgot about it though. Emmy smiled, remembering how good she felt once she got free again. Her father was sure easier to get around than Cal was. Cal likely never forgot about anything since the day he was born. Some chance she got now to go out walking by herself!

She pushed her rag back and forth over the stove top and wondered why remembering was so easy for Cal and so hard for her. She was always forgetting something and making him mad.

She heard the yell again and she stood still, cocking her head, listening, to see if it would come again. She thought she might've heard her name. Could be Cal wanting her to bring something. It stayed quiet outside—nothing but bird sounds and leaf rustling from a little wind that was coming up. She was glad about the wind. It would be nice out on the porch if some of the heat blew away.

This yelling business was a sticker, though. She folded up the stove rag and sat down at the table so she could figure. Frowning, she ran her thumbnail across the green-painted table top. If Cal *was* calling her, could he be doing it just to see if she'd come out when she

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wasn't supposed to? He'd never done it before, not that she could remember. But with Cal you couldn't be sure. His mind could wind around like a bog trail and be just as dangerous, too.

She went to the window. Nothing she could see out there cleared it up. Shaking her head impatiently she went to the door and opened it. "Cal!" she called out. "You Cal!" She stood listening for an answer and then shut the door. If he was calling her, then why didn't he answer when she called him back?

She reached down a cup and poured coffee from the pot on the drainboard. It was near cold, but it tasted good. Sipping it, she turned the problem around in her brain. If he was tricking her it was clear she should keep working. Likely he would hit her if she came out when she wasn't supposed to. On the other side of it, if he was needing her to bring something and she didn't—

Again! There was that yelling again! Emmy stiffened and held herself alert. It *was* Cal and he was calling her name! There he was calling her name when just two minutes before he wouldn't even answer her!

Her frail mouth curved up in a smile. It was a game all right. No other reason to call out and then play possum when she answered, and then right away call again. Well, for once she had him outsmarted.

Still smiling she went back to her work, moving quickly now that she knew what to do. She would finish everything he'd told her and then run out to see what he wanted. It was safe as churches. She'd have every right to be outside once the work was done.

When the floor was clean she went straight to the rabbits, handling them as fast as she could. Every now and then she heard Cal call. It seemed like no time at all before she was ready to clean herself up and go out.

Pleased with herself, she trotted across the yard, wondering which way she should go to find him. She wished he'd call out again so she could tell. She decided to try the north side first and right away she saw she'd picked it right. Just over the rise she saw Dilby's horse standing near the ridge, eating grass. Queer he was loose. She couldn't see Cal yet. When she got there, the horse sidled away like he was making room so she could use the ridge for a lookout.

But before she could do it the sound came again, loud, and so close-by it made her jump. "Emmy!" It was Cal's voice, hoarse-throated and furious.

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She froze. Dilby's horse shuddered and snorted, and Emmy stared at him like maybe he could explain it. Instead, he wheeled and pounded away, leaving her alone on the ridge.

Fearfully she crept to the edge and peered over. Cal was glaring up at her with blazing, hateful eyes. From habit she flinched, though it was plain he was in no shape to hurt her. She stared down in amazement. There was some blood up around his head—not a whole lot, but not what you'd call a little bit either. He looked crooked somehow, like he might've been twisted out of line somehow.

"You're hurt," she said with a nod. It seemed to her his face was a real peculiar color.

"Damn you! Why didn't you come?" He talked in a whispery croak, but there was enough meanness in it to make her careful.

"Didn't know you was hurt."

"You heard me."

"I didn't!"

He struggled, and for a minute she thought he might get up. "I *know* you heard," he said.

"You said I couldn't come out till my work was done!" As soon as she said it she covered her mouth, but it was too late. His face told her plainly she should've stuck to saying she didn't hear him.

"You damn woman, if I could—" His words stopped but his mouth stayed open like he wanted to suck air. She wondered if he was through being able to talk. After a minute he started up again. "Get yourself over to Dilby's. Say I'm hurt bad and to bring the doc right away. Be sure—be sure you say where I am. Now tell it back to me like I told you." He made a moaning sound and closed his eyes.

She looked down at him. "Cal? . . . Cal? . . . Are you fainted, Cal?" She tried to think if she should start right off to Dilby's or wait till he got awake so she could say it back like he wanted. She saw him stir and decided to rattle it off quick: "I'm to go over to Dilby's," she said, "and say you're hurt bad and need the doc, and I got to say where you are under this ridge here."

She got up to leave and paused, struck by a novelty in Cal's orders. "Cal, am I supposed to go over Dilby's all by myself?"

"You move!" he shouted. "Run!"

She ran off, muttering angrily. Ten foot! A big man like him getting that bad hurt from falling ten foot! It wasn't fair. Not when she'd done

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everything so careful, just exactly what he told her. Now she was in bad trouble. Whenever he got able he was going to beat her silly.

She raced down the road toward Dilby's farm. She wondered if running so far would be a bad thing for a baby if she happened to have one in her now. She hoped she didn't. On account of him was why she hoped it. Having that damn Cal for a father wouldn't be much luck for a baby. Her own father was hard enough, but at least you stood a chance if you stayed shy of him when he was drinking. But that Cal!

She slowed down to save her breath. Never get there at all, she thought, if I drop dead running. That Cal! He was itching to get his hands on her. He had a pure killing look on his face down there in the ditch. She saw it plain. He looked just like that time she came on the porch to hear the tractor man talk.

What a silky voice that tractor man had! Just like a man on the radio. Anybody would've wanted to just sit there and hear him. She made sure she sat clear on the other side of the porch and kept her dress pulled down, and she never said a word. She never did a thing but look at him and listen. Cal didn't even act like he minded, but after the man left—

Suddenly Emmy stopped running. The blood washed away from her face. A terrible idea had caught hold of her. What if Maude Dilby wasn't home! Was she supposed to tell Frank Dilby? Cal never ever let her speak to *any* man. She tried to remember Cal's words. Did he say she could tell Frank? Oh, Lordy! Hadn't he half killed her for just *listening* to that other man?

She turned back. The only thing to do was ask Cal. She wished she'd thought of it sooner, before she got so far. But if she went on and Maude really wasn't there, she'd have a longer piece than this to run back.

When she got to Cal he was fainted again. She scrambled down the ridge and tried to wake him. It seemed like a long time before his eyes opened, and when they did they looked clouded over and stupid-like and he couldn't understand what she was asking.

"Cal, Cal! Can I tell it to Frank if Maude's not home? Can I tell it to Frank?"

Finally he heard her. "Oh, God," he whispered, "tell it to Frank."

She started off again, running as fast as she could because Cal certainly seemed bad off.

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Pretty soon she had to slow down. Her breathing was hurting. She'd run too much. As soon as she could she'd run again.

She walked slowly, trying to get some strength. For the first time she noticed the sounds in the woods around her. It was strange not to have Cal walking with her and keeping his eye on her. Her head felt weak and buzzy. A sparrow flew up out of the dust ahead and she watched it till it was lost in the trees. Her knees were watery. She had to rest a minute. Then she'd be able to run on to Dilby's.

She sat beside the road listening to the birds. They were awful noisy. They must be getting ready for bed. She stretched her legs out in front of her and tried to quiet her breathing down. A couple of yards away a bird lighted and then swooped right away. Probably scared of her. She saw a flash of bright orange. A daddy robin, she thought.

She closed her eyes, resting, remembering a robin's nest she found once on her way to school. She smiled, thinking of the screechy little birds with their wide-open mouths. The big robin watched over them, all black-eyed and proud, just like those babies were beautiful and bright-feathered instead of all naked and ugly like they really was.

A dog somewhere off in the fields barked loudly and Emmy's eyes flew open. She sucked in her breath and jumped up. She flew down the road. How long was she sitting there? Oh, Lordy!

She ran faster, her long hair streaming out behind her. No more bird sounds now. Over the trees she saw the first pale showing of the moon. Just a tiny bit of darkness. Not dark yet. Still light. Cal might be dying!

She felt strange running alone in the woods. For a minute she imagined her face was turning into the face of one of the little animals she used to watch, the ones with the smart pointy faces—the ones she used to watch and wonder what they were thinking. She ran harder, stretching her legs as much as she could.

Her heart began to pound and it occurred to her suddenly that a person could only run so fast. She slowed down. She might drop dead herself if she didn't slow down. That wouldn't help Cal, would it? But a person could only run so far, and she was near ready to drop right now. That was for sure.

If she was to faint over by the side of the road there,

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nobody might find her till morning, and then what would happen to Cal? All that running and the fright of seeing Cal under the ridge there was likely to make anybody go faint. Especially somebody puny like she was. Cal was always telling people how puny she was. He always went around saying how he never would've married her if he'd known she was going to turn so puny and worthless for working. Cal always said that.

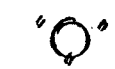
Emmy felt the buzzy feeling coming back in her head. She decided to walk over by the edge of the road just in case she did happen to go faint. Lordy, she was tired! She rubbed an arm across her damp forehead. It was queer how her mind kept running back to the time when her Pop finally forgot about keeping her out of the woods. Just like it was yesterday, she could remember that feeling of getting free. It's like getting wings, she thought, like all of a sudden having wings.

She shivered. It was turning cool. The days might be getting hot, but not the nights, not yet. Too early in the spring for that. Chilly night wouldn't be so good for Cal—not the way he looked. Probably he didn't stand a chance if she didn't get some help quick.

In the dim light Emmy could see the turning of the road near the big crippled pine tree. Once you got to the big pine it wasn't too far off from Dilby's. But just now, right where she was standing, the roadside sheered off. If a person was to fall down right here, nobody would notice. Even if somebody did happen down the road, they wouldn't notice. Not down in that weedy ditch, not until it was light and they came looking.

She could stay still just like the animals did when something was after them. Animals could all do that—just freeze right up, hardly even breathing. They had to save themselves like that. They had a right to do that if something was after them. And wasn't Cal after her every minute of every blessed day? Wasn't he?

Emmy slipped over the edge into the ditch and sat down. Tomorrow when they found her, they would remember how Cal always said she was given to fainting spells. A hundred times he must have said that. But by tomorrow it would be too late for Cal.



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FROM A LAWYER'S ARCHIVES

a NEW series of legal-detective stories by

MICHAEL GILBERT

first magazine publication in the United States

"A firm of family lawyers is one of the few unchanging things in a changing world." What secrets are buried in the files, folders, boxes, and chests of an old established firm of family lawyers? And surely the lawyer delving into those long-hidden records, following the family footprints in the sands of time, pursuing the winding tracks through the maze of yellowed documents, looking through the peepholes of a legal practice — surely that lawyer is a detective in the full meaning of the word . . .

Now, join Bohun burrowing in the records of Horniman, Brewer & Craine . . .

UNDERLINED IN RED

by MICHAEL GILBERT

"Businessmen don't do it," said Bohun. "Doctors don't. Accountants don't. Even Government Departments have had to give it up. Why are solicitors the only people who hang onto their papers forever and ever?"

"It can be extremely helpful," said old Mr. Craine.

"Does being able to settle occasional minor points justify the expense of three strong-rooms in Bell Yard, a Nissen hut in Crawley, a warehouse in Slough, and an old wine cellar at Ware? To say nothing of the services of a highly paid muniments' clerk."

"Come, come. You're not suggesting we get rid of Sergeant Cockerill?"

© 1970 by Michael Gilbert; originally titled "The System."

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"Certainly not. But he'll soon be wanting to retire. If only we could harden our hearts and send every blessed scrap of paper which is more than ten years old to the incinerator—"

"*Ten* years?"

"Well, twelve at a pinch. We've got stuff going right back to Abel Horniman's youth."

Abel Horniman, a legendary figure in Lincoln's Inn, had founded the firm of Horniman, Brewer & Coates in the eighties.

"It was all very well for him," Bohun went on. "In *his* day you could get a legal assistant for a hundred pounds a year and articled clerks worked for nothing."

These were Bohun's feelings in the matter. And that was how he continued to feel—until the day that Herbert Bellinger made an appointment to see him.

Herbert was preceded by a letter in the morning post, handwritten, in greenish-purple ink, on thick paper. The signature at the end was indecipherable. Bohun went in search of his senior partner. Mr. Craine looked at the signature, tut-tutted, turned back to the address, and said, "That's Miss Louise Bellinger."

"Herbert's Aunt Louie?"

"That's right. Herbert's her brother Arthur's only son. Arthur and his wife—what *was* her name? Millicent, that's right—they were both killed in a motor accident in the late thirties. She took the boy over. A nice old lady, but practically ga-ga."

"But Aunt Louie's *your* client. I've only met her once."

"We had a difference of opinion. It was about her cats. I agreed with her that Siamese are exceptionally intelligent animals, and I had no real objection to her leaving all her money to them, but when she wanted to make one of them her executor I had to draw the line. That was ten years ago, and I imagined she'd gone to other solicitors. This sounds like an olive branch. What does she want you to do?"

Bohun cast his eye down the long scrawl.

"Nothing much," he said. "It's mostly gossip. She says, Herbert's in town today and can I see him? I wonder what he's turned out like? I haven't seen him since he was in short trousers. His aunt brought him up here on his way to school. He sat in the corner and cried."

"A lot of boys cry when they go back to school."

"It was nothing to do with going to school. He was crying because he had a stomach ache. He was sick in the passage."

"I expect he'll have im-

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proved," said Mr. Craine soothingly. "What does he want us to do?"

"He wants me to sign his passport application."

Bohun's visitor turned out to be an agreeable man in his middle thirties, with a nondescript face, an engaging smile, and a pair of very wide-awake, dark-brown eyes. He said, "I can still remember the exact spot in the passage where I was sick. *And* the man who appeared with a pail and mop."

"That would be Sergeant Cockerill," said Bohun. "He's still with us."

"You don't change much, do you?"

"A firm of family lawyers," said Bohun, "is one of the few unchanging things in a changing world. How is your Aunt Louie these days?"

"It would be an exaggeration to say she's improving. I'm afraid the time is coming when you'll have to do—whatever it is you do when someone can't cope."

"If she's really becoming incapable of managing her own affairs," said Bohun, "we might have to apply to the Court of Protection, and appoint a receiver."

After his visitor had gone, he reported all this to Mr. Craine who rubbed his hands together and said, "Splendid, splendid. It looks as though we should get the family business back. I hate losing clients. If you're going to take them on, Henry, you'd better do some background reading."

Accordingly Bohun descended, two evenings later, to the cellar below the office which was the kingdom of Sergeant Cockerill, the muniments' clerk. The Sergeant was small and brown, and looked more like an old mole than an old soldier. His black button eyes brightened at Bohun's request.

"You want *everything* I've got on the Bellinger family?"

"Is there much of it?"

"I've got two boxes here, and several more down at Crawley."

"I'd forgotten they were such active clients."

"They're quieter now. Nothing in the last years but a house purchase for young Dr. Vaisey and a will for the Marlins."

"What have the Vaiseys and Marlins got to do with the Bellingers?"

"They're Henry Bellinger's grandchildren."

"Henry?"

"The one who went wrong on the Stock Exchange."

Bohun thought back, and placed Henry Bellinger with an effort. The dying echoes of that

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particular scandal had still been rumbling round the office when he first joined the firm.

"Then there was Alfred. He was the younger son."

"He was the one who married the Bishop of Putney's daughter. It broke up, didn't it?"

"That's right," said Cockerill. "And the Bishop preached a sermon about him, names and all, and we had that big slander action."

"I think I'll start with the immediate family. Let me have anything you've got about Aunt Louie and Cousin Herbert."

"I'm not sure we've got anything much on Herbert."

Bohun thought about his visitor of that morning, business-like and self-possessed. Not the sort of person who would trouble his lawyers much.

"We've got a few files about his father and mother." Cockerill thumbed through his card index. "Arthur and Millicent Bellinger. You remember that accident? A shocking tragedy."

After dinner in his apartment that evening Bohun settled down to enjoy himself. He had suffered, for thirty years, from para-insomnia, and very rarely got more than ninety minutes of sleep in a night. The pile of orange and green files and folders, heaped on the table, overflowing onto a sofa and the floor, promised hours of stimulating reading . . .

Bohun was interested to note how history repeated itself. On the 14th of October 1929, Herbert's parents, Arthur and Millicent Bellinger, had presented themselves before Abel Horniman so that he might vouch for their application for a passport. But whereas Bohun had scribbled a two-line note, Abel had left a forty-line memorandum, covering not only the application but other topics, too. "Arthur was worried about the state of the American stock market. I told him not to upset himself. It would certainly recover."

Bohun was still smiling over this remarkable prediction when he picked up the copies which Abel had made of the applications he had been asked to sign.

When he had read them through twice, he looked at his watch. It was one o'clock in the morning, but there was a government line which was manned night and day. Bohun called the number and spoke at some length. Then he hung up and returned to the files. The minutes ticked past.

At three o'clock a car slid up to Bohun's door and his bell rang. He went down.

His caller introduced him-

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self, without prefix, as Shipman. He was a slightly built man, with a brown face and wiry gray hair, who might have been any age from 40 to 60. His voice, which was equally unrevealing, could have come from any class or region. He could even have been a foreigner who spoke exceptionally good English.

"I have come round to check up on one or two points," he said. "Have you got the papers here—the ones you mentioned?"

Bohun produced the careful transcripts of the passport application forms which Abel Horniman had pinned into the file over 40 years ago.

"You see," he said. "Arthur Bellinger. Eyes, light blue. His wife, Millicent, the same. It would be excessively long odds for two parents with china-blue eyes to produce a son with dark-brown eyes. Not impossible. There might be a regressive strain. You'd have to know about the grandparents to be certain. But I thought it needed checking. *Was* the man who turned up in my office Herbert Bellinger?"

"No," said Shipman. "He wasn't."

"You've checked the application?"

"Yes," said Shipman. "We've checked it."

He opened his wallet and pulled out a photograph. It was the one Bohun had signed. Then he extracted another photograph, an enlarged snapshot of a man leaving an office building. They were clearly the same.

"Who is he?" asked Bohun.

Shipman appeared to consider the point. Then, instead of answering Bohun directly, he said, "How did you know what number to ring up just now?"

"I did a bit of work last year for Colonel Heseltine. Nothing complicated. Just a bit of cross-checking."

Shipman said, "Ah. I wondered. Well, this chap is William Austin. Born in Roysfield, started as a barrister with the Director of Public Prosecutions. Did very well. Then he joined us. We've been worried about him for some time. If he'd tried to get out of England on his own passport, he'd have been stopped. That's why he had to get a new one. As Herbert Bellinger he had a chance of getting through. It isn't a very remarkable face.

"It was a risky way of doing it," said Bohun. "I thought any crook with money could buy a new passport."

Shipman smiled faintly. "Suppose you wanted one. How would you set about it?"

"Me? I haven't the faintest

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idea. But then I'm not a crook."

"Nor is Austin. And if he tried to make contact with a professional criminal he really would have been in trouble."

"He must have known Herbert well. Some of his background patter was terribly convincing. And come to think of it, he must have known that Herbert hadn't already got a passport."

"Not necessarily. This application was made under expedited procedure. If you put up a convincing story—a dying relative whose bedside you're hurrying to—your application goes top of the queue and you can get your passport in forty-eight hours. In a case like that there isn't time to check against all existing applications. So it wouldn't necessarily be noticed that there were two Herbert Bellingers. Neither name's all that uncommon—"

Bohun was staring at his visitor in consternation. "Do you mean to say that he actually *got* his passport and is already out of the country?"

"He got his passport all right. He picked it up this evening—yesterday evening, I should say. But it hasn't been presented at any exit point."

"Would it be serious if he did get out?"

"It wouldn't be serious," said Shipman. "It would be a disaster. He was high enough in D.I.6 to know the names and cover stories of every single one of our agents in Eastern Europe."

Bohun thought again of the man with the nondescript face, the engaging smile, and the wide-awake brown eyes. He said, "You never can tell, can you?"

"When you countersigned his application form," said Shipman, "I've no doubt you were strictly correct in saying that you had known the applicant for twenty-five years. But you realize that it isn't intended to cover a case where you haven't seen him in the interval."

"I do realize it," said Bohun unhappily. "And it's no excuse to say that I think most people would have been fooled. I'll go down today and see Miss Bellinger. She might tell me something useful, though I doubt it. She'd be easy meat for a plausible man like Austin. And I could have a word with Herbert—if he's available. If there's anything else I can do to help locate Austin—"

Shipman smiled again, a faint glimmer of professional amusement. He said, "By acting so quickly, Mr. Bohun, you've gone a long way to atone for your original carelessness. Cer-

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tainly have a word with both the Bellingers. But as for locating Austin, I doubt if that will be necessary. We shall pick him up now as soon as he tries to use his false passport. And even if we don't, we shall have the whole of D.I.5, the Special Branch *and* the regular Police mobilized to trace him—"

It was at that point that the telephone rang. Bohun answered it and said, "They seem to know you're here."

Shipman picked up the receiver without haste, and listened without visible change of expression. At the end he said, "Very well. I'll come back as quickly as I can."

He said nothing more. Bohun was longing to know what development had sent him scurrying back, but realized that his curiosity was unlikely to be satisfied.

In fact, his visitor was actually getting into his car before he decided to speak. He said, "Austin presented that passport at Heathrow half an hour ago. When he spotted that there was going to be trouble he ran for it. They haven't picked him up yet."

Bohun stood in the street and watched the tail-lights of the car disappear. Then he slowly climbed the stairs back to his flat. A thin light was beginning to come back into the sky. It was clear to him that he wasn't going to get his ration of sleep that night. He put on the kettle, made himself a cup of coffee, and finished his reading of the Bellinger family files.

At ten o'clock that morning he called on Miss Louise Bellinger at her house in Hertfordshire. She received him in a decaying morning room, turned a resentful Siamese cat off the sofa, and invited him to sit down. Bohun had wondered how he was going to explain the real motives for his visit, but she saved him the trouble.

"Do you think," she said, "that I'm going mad?"

"Of course not."

"Well, I think I am. Have a look at that. It came this morning."

It was a letter scribbled on two sides of a sheet of thin foreign notepaper. Bohun turned to the end and read, "Yours affectionately, Herbert." He then turned back to the beginning and saw that the address was Salzkammergüt, in the Austrian Dolomites, and that it was dated four days before. Light dawned.

"That's all right," he said.

"It's *not* all right," said Miss Bellinger. "That's the whole point. It's all wrong. I'm beginning to have illusions. Terribly graphic illusions. Four

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days ago—on the very day this was written—a young man came into this room. I couldn't recall his name, but I knew him by sight. He was a friend of Herbert's. Herbert had sent him. He wanted me to write a letter to a Mr. Bohun—he's that old donkey Craine's junior partner—"

"That's me," said Bohun.

The old lady peered at him in mild surprise and said, "Oh, that's who you are, is it? You don't look much like a lawyer."

"Did this man say *why* Herbert couldn't have come along himself?"

"He was busy doing something. I've really forgotten what it was. Does it matter?"

"Not a bit," said Bohun. "Please go on."

"Well, that's all. He said it was urgent, so I sat down and wrote the letter. He posted it for me."

"I see," said Bohun.

"Well, I *don't*. If Herbert was already abroad, why should he need a passport?"

"I'm afraid this man was lying to you."

"What a very curious thing to do. Of course, people nowadays haven't got the same regard for truth. Stop it, you brute!" This was to the resentful cat which had emerged from ambush under Miss Bellinger's chair and buried its claws in her ankle.

She kicked at it deftly and it disappeared, in spitting fury, under the sofa.

"There's one thing I would like to know," said Bohun. "You said you recognized this young man. Can you remember where you'd seen him before?"

"At a wedding."

"Whose?"

The old lady shook her head. "You can't expect me to remember things like that," she said. "It was a family wedding. A very pretty one. He sat on the other side of the church and came and talked to us afterwards. Herbert and he found they'd been at school together—or it may have been at college. I can't remember anything else."

As soon as he got back to the office Bohun sent for Sergeant Cockerill. He said, "I want *all* the files we've got on the Bellinger family. Not just Herbert and Aunt Louie, but the lot."

"Right back to Sir Rawnsley Bellinger?"

"Back to Adam, if we go back that far."

"I don't remember an Adam Bellinger."

"Skip it," said Bohun. "I was speaking metaphorically. I meant, go back as far as our records go."

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"It'll be quite a big job. I'll have to go down to Slough and Crawley and maybe to Ware as well. Is it an urgent job?"

"It's not just urgent. It's of national importance. Hire a car. Make a round trip."

By that evening the fruits of the Sergeant's round trip were completely filling one end of Bohun's sitting room. Eight black japanned tin boxes, two tea chests, a pile of deed wallets, a stack of letter files, and an old brown-leather suitcase, which turned out to contain the full-dress levée uniform, complete with sword, which Sir Rawnsley Bellinger had deposited with Abel Horniman in 1888.

Bohun started with the tin box labeled, *Sir Rawnsley Bellinger, Marriage Settlement,* and set out to reconstruct the family.

Sir Rawnsley had sired three boys and a girl. Henry, the eldest, born in 1890 had, at the early age of 21, married a French girl, Celestine Legrange. Bohun pictured her as a fluffy little thing whose extravagance had driven Henry to his unfortunate financial crash. Their daughter, Lettice, married George Vaisey in 1934. *That* wedding could be ruled out. Herbert would have been one year old at the time.

There were two children, Christopher Vaisey, a doctor, as yet unmarried, and Agnes, who married Hugo Marlin in 1957. Distinctly more possible. Herbert would be 24, just down from Oxford. And the marriage was long enough ago for Aunt Louie to have forgotten all the details. File that one for reference.

Ruling out Aunt Louie and her brother, Arthur, who had married Millicent and produced Herbert, that left only Sir Rawnsley's youngest child, Alfred. Married in 1932, to Margaret Parker, daughter of the Bishop of Putney. Marriage dissolved in 1937. No children. Second marriage in 1939 to a Miss Broach. A gap, represented no doubt by the war, then six children in rapid succession; but the eldest only born in 1947 and all unmarried as yet. So it must have been the Agnes Vaisey-Hugo Marlin wedding. And if Austin had been sitting "on the other side of the church," he must have been a friend of the Marlins *before* he met Herbert at school or university.

Bohun proceeded to concentrate on the Marlin side of the family.

Fortunately, they had been clients for almost as long as the Bellingers. A busy set—with settlements, wills, and deeds of

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family arrangement. Hugo was an insurance broker, who had taken over his father-in-law George Vaisey's business and expanded into half a dozen profitable lines.

Bohun took five large pieces of paper. In the center of each he inscribed a name—George Vaisey, Lettice Bellinger, Christopher Vaisey, Hugo Marlin, and Agnes Vaisey. He then proceeded to write round them, in concentric circles, the names of all the people who had been connected with them, in private life or in business; the trustees and beneficiaries of their settlements; the people who had witnessed their own and their family's wills; their partners; the secretaries and directors of the half dozen companies with whom they had been concerned; and the names of the other companies of which those directors had, in turn, themselves been directors. Hugo seemed to have been an uncommonly quarrelsome man, and one circle comprised the people against whom he had litigated, and the names of the witnesses on both sides.

Lettice Bellinger had been a compulsive letter writer, both before and after her marriage to George Vaisey, and her correspondence produced a whole catalogue of names which, in turn, produced further names, and those names suggested different avenues of research . . .

Six o'clock was sounding faintly from the clocks in the Strand when Bohun straightened his aching back and regarded his first night's work with satisfaction.

There were nearly a thousand names on the sheets of paper, but they were by no means a thousand different names. It was extraordinary how the same people recurred in quite different contexts. It was like seeing your favorite character actor, thought Bohun, turning up in half a dozen different parts.

For instance, a man who had been a secretary in one of George Vaisey's early companies, and had witnessed his will (the first of three that he made), had married a distant Marlin cousin, subsequently divorced her, and was now a director in one of the Marlin company's main competitors, and had featured in the big patent dispute three years before.

William Austin's name had appeared in several different capacities, and each time Bohun had underscored it heavily in red. His mother had been a friend of the Miss Broach who had been Alfred Bellinger's second wife. He had been a

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contemporary of Herbert's, both at school and university, and had spent one complete holiday with him, a fact which Aunt Louie had evidently forgotten.

His acquaintanceship with Hugo Marlin had arisen because they used the same church and had been involved in the troubles of its Vicar, who had been forced to resign over a matter concerning choirboys. Marlin had used his influence to get Austin started at the Bar, but then seemed to have drifted out of his life. Quite a few other people had drifted into it, however, leaving their footprints in the sands of time and in the records of Horniman, Brewer & Craine.

Bohun shaved and breakfasted, and reached the office in time to get hold of the various assistants he wanted. One went to Somerset House, another to the Companies Registry, and young Rowley was dispatched to a newspaper-clipping service which he had used before and which kept, as he knew, a back-issues' section.

Bohun tackled one or two routine jobs that morning, but was unable to concentrate on them. More than half his mind was pursuing the winding tracks of William Austin through the mazes of a solicitor's records. Soon after lunch he abandoned the effort and went back to his apartment, where he found Sergeant Cockerill unloading a further cargo of files.

"You'll know something about this family before you've finished," he said approvingly. "That lot's Sir Rawnsley's brother's family, the Chatterton-Taylors. I'd forgotten we had them. They married into the Carew family, but we don't act for them."

At five o'clock Rowley arrived with a bundle of newspaper clippings and stared in amazement at the scene in Bohun's room.

"What on earth are you doing?" he said. "Programming a computer?"

"In a way," said Bohun.

"What do all those colors mean? Who's the one you've underlined in red?"

"That's a man called William Austin."

"Never heard of him."

"You will," said Bohun. "You will."

Rowley looked at him curiously. He had a great respect for Bohun. "You're not pulling my leg, are you?"

"Certainly not. This is one of the most serious pieces of research I have ever undertaken."

"Who are the blues and greens and purples and yellows?"

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"It's a color code. They are the people who feature most often in Austin's life. The darker the color, the closer the association."

Rowley had been leaning forward to read the names in Bohun's microscopic handwriting. Now he straightened up and pulled a sheaf of clippings from his pocket. "You'll find quite a few of them here," he said. "Look, there's a purple for a start, and a green, and a brown."

Bohun said, "What's that one you've got there?"

"It's a list of the guests at the Vaisey-Marlin wedding. It wasn't actually published, but this place keeps them. They sometimes come in useful."

"Useful?"

"Well, you never know. The best man might assault one of the bridesmaids. I say, can I help? It looks rather like fun."

"If you promise to keep your mouth shut," said Bohun.

An hour later Rowley, looking down a long list of legatees in a will, said, "It's rather like Happy Families, isn't it? Have you got Master Bones, the Butcher's son? No, but can you oblige me with Mrs. Block, the Barber's wife? Talking about Block, here's Colonel Block again. What's he?"

"Outer fringe," said Bohun. "Pale green."

It was two o'clock in the morning when Bohun closed the final file. Rowley had given up an hour before and was fast asleep on the sofa. Bohun gazed at the completed pattern: the assets and liabilities, the lives and loves, the hopes and fears of a group of people, seen through the peephole of a solicitor's practice. The colors around the red had sorted themselves out in a remarkable way. The predominance of the purple, blue, and scarlet was apparent to the naked eye. He reached for the telephone.

Shipman answered it. He said, "No, we haven't traced him yet. We've checked all the normal places. Hotels, boarding-houses, bed-and-breakfast places, Turkish baths. He may have spent two nights under a hedge, but he can't keep that up. He'll show soon."

"You've checked on his family?"

"Of course."

"And his friends?"

Shipman said, the lack of two nights' sleep lending a ragged edge to his voice, "Unfortunately we don't happen to possess a directory of his friends. If we did, of course we could check them."

"That's what I thought," said Bohun. "Austin's a sensible chap. He's been a sort of policeman himself. He knows

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the routine. The place he'd make for would be the house of a *friend.* But not one with too obvious a connection. Someone who'd helped him out in the past, and would do so again, if he spun a convincing yarn."

"Have you got any ideas?"

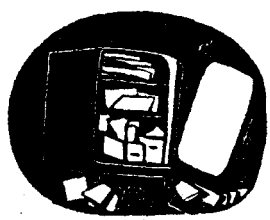
"I can give you three names and addresses. There's a man called Lewis. Averill Lewis. A barrister, not now practicing. He paid Austin's debts for him at Oxford, and helped him at the Bar. He's got a country cottage. I'll give you the address. Next candidate, the Reverend Arthur Champerdowne—spelt with an e. Used to have a North London living, now incumbent of a small Kentish parish. There could be an element of blackmail there. Third, Mrs. Chatterton-Taylor. She's shown a mother interest in Austin on a number of occasions. Extremely motherly. If you hang on I'll give you her address, too."

"Well, thank you," said Shipman.

Shipman thanked Bohun again, more officially, when Austin was discovered hiding in the back room of the Reverend Champerdowne's rambling vicarage.

A long time afterward, when the trial was over, and the sensation had faded out of the paper, Bohun told his senior partner all about it.

Old Mr. Craine was not in the least surprised. "The Special Branch, the Secret Service, the Police," he said. "No doubt they're all right in their own way. But they haven't got our facilities."



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Abel Borwin had a nervous breakdown. When he recovered he told his doctor that he "wanted to get away from it all"—away from the ratrace of his work, away from the people who disturbed him. That suggested a vacation to quiet, peaceful Nova Scotia, to the remote, idyllic countryside . . .

A story you won't forget in a hurry—if you ever forget it at all . . .

THE ROAD WITHOUT A NAME

by WILLIAM BANKIER

Since Abel Borwin had no surviving family, it was his close friends who noticed that he was having another nervous breakdown. His slate-colored eyes widened gradually and began to blink less. A serious man when not under stress, he began now to tell jokes and make puns with almost every sentence he spoke and yet he never so much as smiled in the face of his friends' uncertain laughter.

Then Abel drew a large part of his savings from the bank and bought seven new suits of clothes which he mixed and matched, jackets and trousers, so that he never seemed to wear the same outfit twice. But it was after he went to the barber and had his hair cut very short, clippered all around, his big head emerging sheared in the bean-shave style his parents had enforced when he was a boy of seven—it was after this that his friends had a long talk with him and convinced him to go back and see Dr. Hildred again.

The breakdown was not serious. With medication and psychotherapy, the doctor had Abel living at home within a month, although Abel reported daily to the clinic for his sessions. These were soon reduced to twice weekly and he was encouraged to go back to work. But since his job as account executive at an advertising agency was one of constant pressures and tensions, and because he expressed a strong wish to "get away from under it all for a while," it was agreed he would take a short vacation.

The way Abel Borwin saw it, he wanted to get away from people; but if some people were

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essential to his existence in the next two weeks, he wanted them to be as few as possible. That sounded, the doctor said, like Nova Scotia. So Abel began his planned withdrawal from the complicated, crowded, disturbing society that both supported him and held him prisoner.

First he took a limousine through the densely packed streets of Montreal to the ant nest of Dorval Airport. Here he escaped into the ranks of more than one hundred fatalists sardined into an Air Canada jet. Two hours later he was on a bus driving away from the spaced-out environs of Halifax. Shortly thereafter he was in the Nova Scotia border town of Amherst.

But even this idyllic place in its shade-dappled summer mood was not restful enough for Abel Borwin.

So he rented a car and drove out along narrow highways through villages of a few score contented souls and past hamlets of no more than three farms and a grocery store at an intersection; and even this isolation was not peaceful enough for the sensitive nerves of Abel Borwin.

Then he saw the house. It was only five o'clock and though the sun was still four hours from the horizon, there was no need to look further. A sign on the lawn, similar to dozens he had seen on his drive, said:

The Poplars, Guest House
Miss Elizabeth Purdy

A gravel path at least a hundred yards long was lined with stately poplar trees past which he now drove to park in front of the massive frame house. It was three stories high, with screened porches on the first two floors and gabled windows on the third. The ornate gingerbread molding that decorated the house was in excellent repair—in fact, with its fresh coat of brilliant white paint, the house looked as though it might have been built last year. Yet its style and size, and the mature landscape in which it stood, attested to its age.

The lady who confronted Abel on the porch was another surprise. Miss Purdy was not the lace-draped old biddy that the place suggested; she was a slick tall woman with smart makeup and poodle-cut gray hair, wearing a pants suit and smoking a delicately shaped ivory pipe. She welcomed Abel with a jolly smile and a warm handshake and insisted on helping him with his bags.

Inside the house antiquity was more apparent but no less

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elegant. The furniture was obviously old and expensive—large dark-brown pieces, lots of glass and hand carving, many bookcases, more than one grandfather clock, the flash of crystal, the gleam of silver, the smell of lemon oil and wine in the cool dim rooms.

"I was having a glass of sherry before dinner. Would you pour us both some?" She indicated the Waterford decanter and glasses.

It emerged during their conversation, discreetly but clearly, that Miss Purdy was a very rich lady indeed, thanks to an inheritance from her father who had owned ships when they meant something in Canada. And she loved to spend money and believed in maintaining her property and enjoyed her frequent trips to Boston and New York where her brokers managed her considerable investments. The guest house enterprise was merely a hobby, a way to turn up interesting company to stay with her. She never allowed more than one in the house at a time because more than one would be a chore. And the rate? Oh, anything—$10 a week would be fine.

Abel ate almost that much at supper. Mrs. Purdy herself did the preparing and serving—it was such a nuisance, she said, to have servants about. Could you open this bottle of wine, Mr. Borwin, that's a man's job. There was a thick barley soup and roast beef enough for a large family, with home-fried potatoes and fresh corn and peas, and for dessert, a slab of homemade rhubarb pie. With coffee, which was dark and strong, there were glasses of Hennessy brandy, with the bottle left on the table.

Later Abel found himself propped on a sofa in the den before a color television set with a bowl of cashews on one side and a tray of mints on the other, and when Miss Purdy asked what he would like to drink and he said beer, she came to him with a frosty tankard of Carlsberg. Then she sat beside him where he could sense her warmth and inhale the fragrance of her perfume mixed with the aroma of the fine tobacco she burned in the charming little pipe, and as they laughed together at a summer replacement variety show, Abel Borwin began to feel like a happily married man basking in the attentiveness of his loving wife.

And this illusion of domesticity was heightened later when they went upstairs together and Miss Purdy lost her balance outside his bedroom door and fell against him with

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a little squeal of dismay, which turned to a purr as he took her in his arms and kissed her.

The next morning, feeling as though he had never been sick but willing to recuperate in this fashion forever, Abel sat across the breakfast table and nodded at Elizabeth's good advice. "So you just go ahead and enjoy a walk through the country. It's a perfect day and I've got plenty to do here."

Miss Purdy had not exaggerated the quality of the day. There was perfection in the fresh breeze that moved gigantic, flat-bottomed cumulous clouds across the blue sky, interrupting the bombardment of the sun's rays at intervals just frequent enough to temper its heat with an acceptable proportion of shade. Abel set out along the edge of the country road in the direction he would have gone had he not stopped at The Poplars. One by one he passed large farmhouses set back from the road, but none as elegant as the Purdy residence. All, however, had names posted on some sort of sign, either wrought iron or painted wood. Here was *Shady Dell*, next *The Hendersons*, followed by *Apple Hollow* and, unavoidably, *Dunwerkin*.

Thus it was that after a succession of these signs, Borwin was surprised to pass a house with no sign but instead, in tin numerals nailed to one of the white pillars of the porch, the number 17.

Seventeen was the number of Abel's apartment back in the city; this thought crossed his mind idly. Then, as he stood on the verge and stared at the house which was as large as Elizabeth's but as outstanding in its need of paint and repair as hers was elegant, Abel was struck by the inappropriateness of the number. Seventeen what? This country road had no name. It was not like 17 Elm Street in a town. And there was no Number 15 farther back on the road, or a Number 16 on the other side. Strange indeed. However.

Back at The Poplars with several miles of country road behind him and a mug of icy beer on the table before him, Abel mentioned this strangeness. "Oh, yes," Elizabeth said as she filled a bowl with pretzel sticks, "my brother Gerald lives there. He used to live here with me before I turfed him out last year. Not that I don't love my brother—God knows I do love him and I don't mind what he does, but I do insist on peace and quiet. And he'd keep bringing people in here, and then all that noise and fighting. You wouldn't believe the yelling that used to go on here!

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So I gave him sufficient money from my inheritance to buy that house."

"I must say, it's nothing like your place," Abel commented.

"There is no place anything like this place anywhere near this place," Elizabeth said, lowering herself beside Abel with a rustle of silk and a wave of lavender bath powder, "so this must be the place."

Later that afternoon, when they were beginning to think again of food, there was a sound of footsteps on the porch and a hollow rapping on the frame of the screen door. Elizabeth went and stood behind the screen and Abel followed her. He saw over her shoulder a young couple clad in the gypsy garments of contemporary youth, their skin coppered from the weather, their few possessions in a blanket roll beside them.

His landlady was saying, "I'm sorry, we're full up here. Why don't you try down the road, in that direction? Number 17, a few farms down—he often takes people in."

When they were gone she said, "I really couldn't bear to have anyone here with us, could you?"

And Abel agreed. "It's perfect as it is."

Which was true of the next day even though it rained hard and a cold front passed through with high winds and a furious lashing of the poplars along the lane. Elizabeth turned these conditions to advantage, however, by having Abel build and light a fire of birch and maple in the huge living-room fireplace. They spent most of the day in front of the roaring, scented flames with a couple of bottles of champagne, roast-beef sandwiches, a deck of cards, and a giant cribbage board on legs.

Following a night of mutual comforting while the wind strafed the bedroom windows with bursts of rain, the next morning dawned calm, sunny, and warm. After a lingering breakfast Abel accepted Elizabeth's suggestion that he refresh himself with another walk.

Again he set out past the neighboring farms and was about to pass her brother's decrepit house when something made him pause. The old house had survived the storm and yet there was something different about it. Then he saw it—the number 19. At first he wondered if he could have misread the number two days before. But, no—17 was his apartment number; he had noted that especially.

The path leading to Gerald Purdy's home was a short one and Abel now covered it

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quickly to stand beneath the porch and stare at the number. From this closer distance there could be no doubt; beneath the number 9 he could see traces of the outline where the 7 had been. Furthermore, the metal of the 9 was fresher than that of the 1.

A footstep on the gravel startled Abel and he whirled to face Gerald Purdy. The resemblance to his sister was obvious in the broad forehead and large brown eyes. But where Elizabeth was trim of figure, the young brother was obese, overfed, self-indulged in the extreme; everything about him was fat from his lips to the gross fingers that held a wet cigar close to his pouchy cheek.

"Admiring my house? It isn't much, I'm afraid."

"To be frank I was intrigued by this number 19. I was sure the other day it was a 17."

"Well, now, that wouldn't make much sense, would it? I suspect you're staying at my sister's down the road. She always sends her people walking down to me. Come in and have a drink out of the sun."

Stung by an unreasonable pang of jealousy at Purdy's reference to Elizabeth's other guests, Abel felt inclined to refuse; but he did not want word of his rudeness to get back to his landlady. So half an hour later he was sitting in the dusty, badly kept living room with a large whiskey in his hand and a boring tour of the old ruin behind him.

Gerald Purdy sat across the room, refilling his glass from a bottle on the floor by his chair and talking about local matters which Abel soon tuned out. Having lost the thread of the conversation, he was surprised when Purdy stood up and wrestled two mahogany lecterns into the center of the room and placed them facing each other several feet apart.

"This one is yours, old fellow," Purdy said to his now-attentive guest. "Please take your place."

"For what?"

"For the game. We always play the game. You may choose the topic." He consulted a sheet of paper on his lectern. "There are a couple that have never been used. It wouldn't be fair, of course, for me to debate a topic for the second time. Which would you like? 'Resolved That the Youth of America Prefer Slavery to Freedom,' or 'Resolved That Money Is the Root of All Happiness.' You may debate Pro or Con—take your choice."

"I'm really not very good at—"

"Come, you must. It's my one pleasure, my passion!"

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Purdy's vehemence convinced Abel of the futility of refusal.

"Very well. For just a few minutes."

"Good. Choose a topic."

"The first one, I think."

"Pro or Con?"

"Con."

"Fine. I shall begin so that you'll have time to collect your arguments."

Abel nodded, and recognizing the need to match his host's madness, downed his drink and poured another as Purdy began to speak.

"The youth of America certainly do prefer slavery to freedom, as I shall amply demonstrate. Oh, not the slavery of manacle and leg iron, but the tyranny of conformity to dogma and cant."

Purdy was an orator in the old style. There was a fascination in watching his movements around the lectern, in hearing the modulation of his voice, in observing the theatrical lift of his chin. When he took out his pocket watch, Abel thought this was another dramatic punctuation, but Purdy said, "Very well, your opening statement and rebuttal. Proceed."

"I can't match my worthy opponent's rhetoric, so I won't try. But I do believe he has made a number of statements that don't bear close examination. First of all, though some young Americans are undoubtedly Communist party members, it is absurd to suggest that this political doctrine motivates them all."

As Abel warmed to his subject, he began to enjoy himself—that is, until he noticed his opponent's reaction. Where the large face had been wreathed in a Jovian smile at first, now the brow was down, the eyes were small, the fat lips clamped in a furious pout. The sudden change in masks made Abel falter. "Look," he said, "if this doesn't suit you we can stop."

"Not at all. We have begun an argument and argue it out we shall." Purdy's voice was thunder in the stuffy room. "To the finish."

And now he took up an attack on Abel's opening statement with such viciousness that Abel felt his skin grow cold. Purdy compared his opponent to a voyeur who enjoyed ogling the young, extracting vicarious pleasure from their obscene behavior. He said those who searched below their own generation for heroes were emotional cripples, cases of arrested development.

Abel began frantically to look for a way out—and courtesy be damned.

"Yes, we have examples

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a-plenty of the long-haired hippies roaming the country with a bed roll and no marriage license, knocking on the doors of the respectable, ready to practice their parasitic ways. They aren't ready to die for their country, but they're dying to tear it down. Well, we can accommodate them. We can and do."

Purdy's ranting reached a crescendo as he flung the lectern aside—and now Abel saw that there was a large kitchen knife in his host's hand.

Abel ducked under the first wild swing of the blade and for the next few minutes he felt like a rabbit trapped in a barn with a wild bull. He was almost out of breath and was bleeding from a cut on the back of one hand when a loose carpet saved him. Purdy's feet went out from under him and he fell heavily. It provided Abel with the few seconds he needed to reach the front door, fling it open, and stampede down the gravel to the road.

"You must call the police," he pleaded with Elizabeth. "He's your brother and I'm sorry—but he's mad!"

"I will, darling. Finish your drink and I'll bring you another." She was applying medication and a bandage to his wounded hand.

The whiskey was almost straight and it burned Abel's mouth, but he needed it. "I'm sure he killed those two young people who came to the door the other day. I have no proof, but I'm certain. And I believe he's killed seventeen other people before this. He was certainly going to kill me!"

"He was always getting into trouble and I've tried to protect him," Elizabeth said. "And now it's come to this." There was a tear in her eye. She took Abel's empty glass and brought it back full. He was in no mood for supper, so by the time he finished his second whiskey he was ready for early bed.

Tucked under the sheet, his head floating, he shivered slightly. Elizabeth frowned with concern, slipped out of her dress, lifted the sheet, and lay beside him to ease his anxiety. Just before he fell asleep he repeated, "You will call the police?"

"Yes, I promise."

And Elizabeth was as good as her word—in fact, she called not only the local constable but the Volunteer Fire Department, too. But by the time they arrived her beautiful white house was a smoldering ruin.

"It was my boarder," she told the Fire Chief. "He drank too much and he would smoke in bed in spite of my warnings. And he was such a nice man."

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"What will you do, Miss Purdy? The house is a total loss."

"I'm sorry about that, of course. But there's plenty of money in the bank. And my brother Gerald lives alone down the road. He'll take me in."

She spent the morning napping at Gerald's house and the afternoon sweeping and dusting. "There's a lot to do here to get things in shape, young man, and I intend to see it done. You'll have to do your share and that includes behaving yourself as much as possible. You're a mischievous young scamp but you'll have to try—you really will. I'm tired of cleaning up your messes."

But Gerald Purdy, submerged by the weight of his sister's personality, sat in the bay window with his robe and slippers on and did nothing.

So all the chores were left to Elizabeth. Which was all right since she enjoyed being busy. In fact, darkness had fallen when she took a stepladder and hammer to the front porch where she busied herself with the final detail of a full day's work.

And the next morning, when the sun's first rays struck the front of the old house which sorely needed paint and would now soon get it, they flashed on the shiny new metal of the number

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a *NEW* detective story by

PATRICIA McGERR

To give you a provocative idea of what Patricia McGerr's new story is about, here are some of the alternate titles that we considered:

Bait the Cop
Round Robin
Accessories After the Fact
Somebody's Telling the Truth

But because the story is so fiendishly clever, we decided on

THIS ONE'S A BEAUTY

by PATRICIA McGERR

"This one's a beauty," Captain Rogan said cheerfully as he climbed into the car beside Sergeant Pringle.

It was an odd term to apply to a murder, but the sergeant nodded agreement. By Homicide Squad definition it described any investigation that could be wrapped up without overtime. And the case they were headed toward on this crisp January evening was, it appeared, right at the top of that category. The desk man had recorded the call at 7:47.

"This is Horace Sanderson," the authoritative voice at the other end had announced. "I want to report a murder. I've shot a man in my office."

So all they needed to do was visit the scene, hear his confession, and bring him in. As the captain said, "This one's a beauty."

"Sanderson," Pringle ruminated while he eased the car away from the curb. "Don't I know that name from somewhere?"

"You should," Rogan returned. "If he's never made a monkey of you on the witness stand, you're a lucky exception."

"Oh, sure, the big defense lawyer. No, I haven't testified in any of his cases, but I've heard plenty from those who

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have. They say he gets an extra charge out of making our guys sweat."

"Too right." Rogan's lips twisted wryly in personal recollection. "On cross-examination he can turn you round till you misspell your own name. But now it's our turn. I'm going to like seeing Mr. Horace Sanderson in the dock."

"Weird, isn't it, that after all the raps he's beaten for other people he'd turn himself in without a fight."

"It has to mean the evidence against him is airtight," Rogan said with satisfaction. "Sanderson knows criminal law up and down, backwards and sideways. If he could've seen the smallest loophole he'd never have started off by admitting he did it."

"Maybe he'll claim self-defense," the sergeant suggested.

"On the phone he called it murder. He knows every meaning of that word and it doesn't include justifiable homicide."

"How about not guilty because of temporary insanity?"

"That's one he might try," Rogan conceded, "but it won't affect our schedule. All we want are the facts. If he decides to take the psycho route it'll be the D.A.'s headache. Unless the lab boys slow us down, we'll be drinking squadroom coffee again before ten o'clock tonight."

It was a short ride to the building that housed the Sanderson law offices. Pringle parked in front and the two men rode the elevator to the fourth floor. The only door that showed a light was lettered "Sanderson, Sanderson & Sanderson, Attorneys-at-Law." At Rogan's sharp rap it was opened by a tall broad-shouldered man of 60-odd whose physique, grooming, and general air of affluence fitted him to intimidate the most hostile witness.

"You made fast time, gentlemen," he complimented them. "Captain Rogan, I believe." He paused to nudge his recollection. "Ah, yes, you were the arresting officer in the Hutchins murder, weren't you? A pity you got the wrong man. And your colleague—" He looked questioningly at Pringle. "I don't believe our paths have crossed before."

"This is Sergeant Pringle," Rogan snapped. Acquittal of the man he was sure had killed Tom Hutchins was still a rankling memory. "It's my duty to inform you that you are not required to answer—"

"Skip the litany," Sanderson cut him off. "I'm well informed as to my rights and I'm already

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represented by counsel. If you'll come into the next room I'll show you the corpse and tell you what happened."

A cool, cool customer, Rogan thought with reluctant admiration. His head's halfway in the noose, but he's the same take-charge guy as he is in the courtroom.

Sanderson crossed the reception room to open an inner door. He passed through it, then stepped aside to unblock the view. Sprawled on the dark green rug of what appeared to be a conference room was a man's body.

Rogan dropped to one knee beside it. Lifting the left wrist he felt for a pulse, though he was sure he wouldn't find one. The blood-matted hair at the back of the head indicated that a bullet must have entered the brain to bring instant death.

"D.O.A.," he told Pringle. "We'll want the technical unit and the morgue wagon."

"Use the phone on the desk in the corner, Sergeant," Sanderson said helpfully.

Rogan straightened and looked down at the dead man. He had fallen forward, but the face was turned to rest on one cheek. Rogan felt a glimmer of recognition.

"An old friend, Captain?" Sanderson asked. "His name is—or was—Chet Tankersley."

Gambler, confidence man jack-of-many-crooked-trades The computer in Rogan's heac punched the appropriate slots No loss to society. He liked the case even better.

"You shot him?" he asked

"With this gun." Sandersor stepped around the body tc approach the long table that filled two thirds the length of the room and pointed to the weapon that lay on its mirror-bright surface. "I have a license for it, of course. A criminal practice can bring in some rough characters, so I keep it loaded and ready in my desk."

Is he laying a basis for self-defense after all, Rogan wondered, then looked again at the victim and was reassured The shot had come from behind and the position of the body showed that Tankersley had been on his way out of the office.

Pringle had finished telephoning. "They're on the way, Captain," he reported.

"Fine. Now we'd better hear your story, Mr. Sanderson."

"I'm waiting to tell it," he assured him. "I want my lawyers present, of course."

Three private offices were connected to the conference room. On each was a name. Horace T. Sanderson, Sr. Horace T. Sanderson, Jr. Paul

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A. Sanderson. The lawyer walked to the center door—his own—and opened it to say, "Come out, boys, I need you."

"My sons and legal counsel," he introduced the two young men who answered the summons. "Horace, Junior and Paul." Paul, the younger one, was a slim replica of his father, while Horace, Jr., slightly overweight, with narrow eyes and soft lips, showed no sign of the hard courage and sharp intelligence that marked the other two. Junior must favor the maternal line, Rogan decided. If the firm is to go on, it will be Paul who takes the old man's place.

"Sit down, gentlemen." Sanderson took a seat at the end of the table farthest from the body, with one son on each side. Sergeant Pringle stayed at a desk near the door. Rogan turned one of the chairs round and straddled it to retain a sense of mobility.

"I'll get right to the point." Sanderson, Sr.'s tone seemed more suited to chairing a board meeting than to confessing a crime. "This afternoon, Sonny—that is, Horace, Junior—told me he was being blackmailed. Tankersley had a certain document bearing Horace, Junior's signature that could, if made public, lead to his disbarment. Tankersley asked $25,000 and was coming here today after office hours to collect.

"Sonny had managed to raise $15,000 on his own and asked me for the balance. I advised him not to give the man one cent and said that I would deal with him myself. My two sons, therefore, left the office at 5:30, the usual time, and drove home together. I stayed behind and was alone when Tankersley arrived.

"I told him there would be no payoff, now or ever, and threatened him with arrest for blackmail unless he immediately gave me the incriminating document. It was, I admit, a bluff and it failed. That paper, as Tankersley well knew, would not only end my son's career but cast doubt on the integrity of our law firm. He grew abusive and said I had until noon tomorrow to change my mind. If by that time he did not receive the entire sum, the document would be delivered to the secretary of the Bar Association.

"Well, gentlemen, what could I do? I looked at that miserable creature who held in his hand my family name, my son's future, the professional reputation I'd built with such care." His voice rose to the dramatic height that had swayed so many juries. "Something exploded in my brain."

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He paused and Rogan exchanged a quick glance with the sergeant. So it was to be a plea of temporary insanity.

"He walked out of my office. I took the gun from my drawer, followed him into this room, and shot him. Then I phoned my own house. Paul answered. I said I wanted them both here and they drove right back. I explained what had happened and, as my counsel, they advised me to notify the police and make a clean breast of it. Which I have just done."

"And the document that Tankersley was holding?" Rogan asked.

"I took it from the dead man's pocket, tore it into small pieces, burned the pieces, and flushed away the ashes. I apologize for destroying evidence, but I believe my motive is clear enough without making public what I've killed a man to keep secret."

Before Rogan could answer, a rap on the outer door signaled the arrival of the technical unit. Admitted by Pringle and instructed by Rogan, they set about their routines with camera and other equipment. The captain returned to the three Sandersons.

"I appreciate your giving us such a straightforward story," Rogan told the father.

"I like to make your job easy when I can, Captain," Sanderson, Sr. returned with sham geniality. "Besides, I really have no choice. The body is in my office. The bullet came from my gun. Tankersley may even have told someone about his appointment with Sonny. I know better than to try to buck those odds."

"Then the next step is to go to Headquarters, get your statement typed and signed, and—"

"I'm familiar with the procedure," Sanderson reminded him. "And I'm sure you'll follow all the rules. We can't charge police brutality tonight, can we, boys?"

"No, we can't," Paul answered for them both. His glance at Rogan held the same glint of mockery as his father's. "Our client's statement was freely given and is correct in almost every detail."

"Almost?" Rogan felt a stir of apprehension on the edge of his complacency.

"He's made one significant error," Paul continued. "Sonny didn't say anything to dad about being blackmailed. Sonny told me."

"Oh? Then you passed it on to your father?"

"Certainly not. I agreed with my brother that we'd better keep it to ourselves. So I told dad I had some work to finish,

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and he and Sonny left together. After that everything happened just as my father reported it—except it was I who waited here for Tankersley. I'm the one who shot him."

"You—" Rogan left the sentence suspended.

"It's his word against mine, Captain," Sanderson, Sr. said. "Which of us do you believe?"

"I'll get that answer from your other son." Rogan's eyes moved to Horace, Jr. "Did you tell your father or your brother about the blackmail? Which one rode home with you?"

Sonny's gaze stayed on the table top. His voice was low, with each word forced through stiff lips.

"I didn't tell anybody," he answered. "And I didn't go home. I said *I* had work to finish and let dad and Paul leave without me. When Tankersley came I told him I had only fifteen thousand. He said it wasn't enough, he was sure my father would give me the rest sooner than see me disgraced. I said I didn't want dad to know and he laughed at me. He said I had until twelve o'clock tomorrow noon to raise the whole twenty-five thousand or—as dad told you—he'd turn the paper over to the Bar Association. I couldn't let that happen. So when he started to go, I—I shot him."

"Where did you get the gun?"

"Out of dad's drawer. I know where he keeps it."

"Let's see if I have the picture straight. Tankersley left your office, you ran into your father's room, took his gun and—"

"No," Sonny interrupted. "I was already in dad's room when I talked to Tankersley. I'd put the money in his safe and wanted to be where I could get it out right away if he agreed to settle for what I had."

"And you?" He turned to the younger brother. "Where did you conduct the interview?"

"I'm the junior junior partner," Paul returned smoothly. "My room is small and my desk cluttered. When dad's away I take my visitors into his office."

Very carefully arranged, Rogan thought glumly. Tankersley's fingerprints will show up only in the father's office—just as all three stories indicate.

"We're a close-knit family," Sanderson explained. "I told my two sons that I was guilty and that they shouldn't interfere. But you know how it is with young people nowadays. No respect."

"One of you killed Tankersley." Rogan organized his thinking out loud. "Then he

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called the other two back to the office. The three of you talked it over and cooked up this round robin."

"Exactly." Sanderson beamed at him. "So you have two confessions left over. Untidy, isn't it? If one of us is charged, each of the other two will swear he did it. You haven't a prayer of getting an indictment, much less a conviction."

"Don't bet on it, Mr. Sanderson," Rogan said. "You've wasted your time and mine with your phony confessions."

"Only two are phony," Paul murmured. "One of us is telling the truth."

Rogan ignored the interruption. "Now we'll get on with our work, just as we would if all three of you had denied it. We solve a fair number of cases without anybody coming forward to say he did it." He could not resist the sarcasm. "Sometimes we even convict one of your clients."

"Indeed you do," Sanderson agreed heartily. "The city has a very efficient force and I'll observe your work with great interest." He looked beyond Rogan to watch the morgue men cover the body preparatory to its removal. "I don't usually get to see the start of an investigation. But I'm afraid the evidence you'll collect here won't be very helpful. Fingerprints, for instance. I know how important they can be. But we were a bit nervous while we waited for you and we wandered about opening doors and drawers. As a result you'll find all three sets of prints in random order all over the place."

"In other words," Rogan interpreted, "the one who committed the crime gave the other two a step-by-step account of his actions from the moment of Tankersley's arrival. Then the other two re-enacted the crime, taking care to touch all pertinent surfaces. No doubt all three of you handled the weapon."

"Naturally." Sanderson's face burlesqued repentance. "I'm afraid we did something even more reprehensible. I call your attention to the holes in the wall near the ceiling. The two of us who aren't guilty both took a shot up there. Very bad for the paneling, but tests will show that all three of us recently fired a gun."

The old sod's enjoying this, Rogan thought sourly. He's used to being called in to pick up the pieces after his client has made a mess of it and the police have all the evidence. For the first time he's been on the scene ahead of us, able to set the stage to show exactly what he

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wants us to see. He's handled more murder cases than most policemen and can anticipate all our moves, plus some we might not think of.

"Worried, Captain?" the senior Sanderson prodded.

"Just trying to work out a timetable." Rogan left his chair and walked to the head of the table to place himself between father and older son. "You said your sons left here at 5:30." He focused on the father. "How long does it usually take to get home?"

"In normal traffic, twenty-five minutes."

"And what time did you phone them?"

"Six fifteen. My interview with Tankersley was brief."

"Then I can assume they got back here at 6:40. Right?"

"Give or take five minutes, that's correct."

"That gave you a full hour to discuss the situation, make a plan, and arrange the—er—stage effects. I'm inclined to agree with you, Mr. Sanderson, that we won't find evidence here to point to the one who actually committed the murder." He waited for the other man's lips to curve into a satisfied smile before adding, "It may be easier to discover which two went home."

Rogan whirled to face Horace, Jr. and leaned down till their noses were only inches apart. "Tell me, Sonny," he barked, "who drove the car home?"

"Dad always—" The young man broke off, gulped air. "I mean, I don't know who drove tonight. I didn't go home. I told you, I stayed here. I—" His eyes darted to his father, seeking rescue.

"Don't bully the boy," Sanderson said softly. "He's already told his story."

"But he was about to tell a different one. He started to say that you drove home and he rode beside you. That places Paul in the office at the time of the murder."

"So it does," Paul agreed. "You see, I was telling the truth all the time."

"Don't talk nonsense, Captain," Sanderson ordered. "What Sonny started to say was 'Dad always drives.' And that's true. When the three of us are together, I'm always the driver. But I wasn't in the car this evening, so I presume Paul took the wheel. That's how it usually is, isn't it, Sonny?"

"Yes, I—I don't care much for driving."

And you don't care much for this game of bait-the-cop either, Rogan added mentally. Sanderson, Sr. and Paul are riding every wave, but Sonny looks as if he's about to go

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under. Judging by the way he acts, he's guilty as hell, but that doesn't move me forward. Unquestionably he's guilty of falling into a blackmail trap—which makes him responsible for what happened tonight, even if someone else did the shooting.

Rogan walked down the table to confer with Sergeant Pringle, then returned to the Sandersons.

"Thought of some more questions, Captain?" the father asked.

"The same one," Rogan answered. "Which of you three killed him? We're going to look for the answer in places where you didn't have time to doctor the evidence. Your house and your car, for instance."

"Good thinking," Sanderson applauded. "Since you can't find the guilty one, maybe you can pin down the two who are innocent. The car's parked in the garage under this building, but I doubt if it will yield any secrets. Will it, Paul?"

"No, dad," the younger son answered confidently. "You see," Paul told Rogan, "after I asked my father and brother to come back here, it occurred to us that you'd be curious about who drove and who was in the passenger seat. So I went down with a clean cloth and wiped off the wheel, the door handles—did a general cleanup job. Your fingerprint man is going to draw another blank."

"But you didn't go all the way home with your clean cloth, did you?" Rogan asked. "Or did you alert someone there to take care of it?"

"No," Paul conceded. "Mom's out of town and we're batching it this week. You'll get a fine collection of prints at home. But since that's where the three of us live, I don't know what you expect them to prove."

"Don't underestimate the captain's intelligence," his father advised. "He's thinking of spots like doorknobs which might indicate who was the last man to go in or out."

"How disappointing for you," Paul said. "There's an electric gadget in the car that opens the garage door. The stairs go right into the center hall with no need to turn any knobs."

"Don't overlook the telephone," Sanderson suggested. "If it was Paul who answered my call, as I said he did, his prints will be on top. Unless he was in his own room at the time, in which case the prints won't prove anything."

"No more," Paul seconded, "than can be proved if dad took my call on his bedside phone."

"Just to complete the circle,

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Sonny," Rogan asked without enthusiasm, "who answered the phone when you called home?"

"Paul did. But I asked him to let me talk to dad."

"You're not forgetting," Sanderson put in, "the possibility of witnesses?"

"I'm sure you didn't forget it, either," Rogan returned.

"The boys assured me there was no one else in the elevator or in the garage when they left here and, of course, by the time they got back, the building was empty. If we weren't sure of that we wouldn't be taking this line."

"But the streets and sidewalks weren't deserted," Rogan reminded him. "There's no way on earth you can be sure that someone won't come forward who saw you somewhere along the way."

"No doubt many people saw the car," Sanderson agreed. "But it was dark by 5:30 and I challenge anybody to make positive identification in a moving vehicle under those conditions. Especially when there's such a strong family resemblance."

So now, Rogan told himself, we're back to Go. Sanderson has foreseen every possible move. He reads my thoughts even before I think them.

Rogan left them to pace restlessly around the table. Since Sanderson is so knowledgeable about how the official mind works, I'd better stop thinking like a police officer and try to get inside the murderer. There must be some place he's slipped up.

He looked back at his antagonists. Sanderson, Sr. and Paul were talking in low tones. Sonny watched them warily. Who scares Sonny most, Rogan wondered, his father or me? Is he shaking because he may be tagged for murder or because he may not be able to stick to the lie the old man's making him tell? Junior's getting closer and closer to the edge. If I could talk to him alone, he'd break. But the other two won't let that happen.

Rogan went into the office marked with the name of Horace, Jr. and sat down at a desk whose bare top could indicate either extreme efficiency or that he was given very little to do. An inspection of the nearly empty drawers tended to support the second theory. Sergeant Pringle came in to report that the car, as predicted, showed no clue as to its most recent occupants.

"Tough going, Captain," the sergeant commiserated. "You got a favorite?"

"I like Sonny for it," Rogan answered. "His father and brother are the smart ones, the

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glib ones, the two who can stick to a lie and sidestep any trap that might give them away. If one of them had killed Tankersley, it's not likely they'd set up an escape route that would be shut off if Sonny broke under pressure. But with Sonny as the killer, the three-way confession lets him tell nothing but the truth. That way Sonny knows the answer to every question we ask and only the other two need to be quick-witted."

"He looks like a very nervous boy," Pringle said. "Too bad you can't lean on him a little."

"Maybe I can. I'm thinking about a breath test."

"The kind the traffic squad uses on drunk drivers?"

"That's it. Can you get a machine up here in a hurry?"

"Right away." Pringle looked puzzled, but he didn't ask any more questions. While he telephoned, Rogan moved on to the office of Sanderson, Sr. where the technicians were turning up an abundance of prints that pointed nowhere. Then he looked into Paul's room, which confirmed the younger son's statement about its smallness and clutter. When the sergeant announced the arrival of an officer with a breath machine, Rogan escorted all of them to the table.

"You don't seem to be making much progress, Captain," Sanderson jibed.

"I'm still trying to eliminate the two who are lying," Rogan answered. "We've established that they arrived home about twenty minutes before the phone call that brought them back. The question is, how did they spend that time at home?"

"An intriguing question," Sanderson said. "Unfortunately, since none of us admits having gone home, there's no one to answer it."

"So I'll have to guess. What does a successful lawyer do at the end of a hard day's work? I think he unwinds over a drink. Am I right?"

"Absolutely," Sanderson agreed. "My personal preference is a very dry martini. But I don't see how that's relevant."

"I'm going to ask you to cooperate in an experiment. We have here a machine that measures blood alcohol content. If three of you blow into it and two register a recent intake of alcohol—well, you follow my reasoning, I'm sure."

"You'll put it down that those two were relaxing at home while the third was committing murder. Very ingenious." Sanderson's tone was indulgent. "I've never seen one of these before. Always been curious about how they work."

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The officer placed the box-like machine in front of Sanderson, twisted a dial, and put a narrow tube into his hand.

"Just blow into it," Rogan directed. "The needle will tell us if you've had a drink."

Sanderson followed instructions. The needle stayed at zero. The officer turned the machine to Paul, who provided a breath sample with the same result.

"Another good idea gone wrong," Sanderson said in mock sympathy as the machine was moved in front of Sonny. "There's one flaw in your reasoning, Captain. We're civilized people who treat our before-dinner drinks with ceremony. We don't rush from car to bar." He looked at his older son who was regarding the machine with a suspicious scowl. "Go ahead, Sonny. It won't bite."

"This is stupid," Sonny said.

"Play the game," his father ordered. "Give the captain his full quota of hot air."

The officer lifted the tube to Sonny's mouth. His scowl deepened, but he gave a quick exhalation. The needle moved to the left.

"Alchoholic content point zero eight," the officer read. "At his weight that's about four ounces."

"What?" Sanderson exploded. "That's impossible. Sonny wasn't even—" He broke off, clamped his lips shut.

"Go on," Rogan prodded. "Finish the sentence. 'Sonny wasn't even at home tonight!' Of course he wasn't. You wouldn't have been so willing to take the test if you weren't sure there were no drinks taken at your house. What you didn't allow for was the possibility that Sonny gave you a censored account of his activities after you left the office. He probably has a habit of not telling you things you'd disapprove of."

"I don't know what you're getting at," Sanderson said. "Your machine's obviously broken."

"That can be checked," Rogan said impassively. "You've been a step ahead of me all the way, Mr. Sanderson. Too bad you don't have as thorough an understanding of your older son. He had a twenty-five minute wait from the time he killed Tankersley until you two got back here. He was alone with a dead body, facing a murder charge and—maybe worst of all—about to have to explain it all to you. It should have occurred to you that he'd need a stiff drink to steady his nerves. Then you'd have found the vodka bottle he has hidden in his desk and

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fitted it into your triple confession. You see, Sonny, it doesn't pay to lie to your father."

"Why, you—" Sonny made a lunge toward Rogan.

"Shut up, you fool," his father barked. "Sit still and keep your mouth shut."

"*You* told me to blow in his machine." Sonny turned furiously on his father. "I didn't want to do it, but you think you're so damn smart. I shouldn't have phoned you. I should have taken my fifteen thousand and headed for Mexico. I knew your fancy scheme would never work."

"It came close," Rogan said pleasantly. "Do you and Paul want to withdraw your confessions now?" he asked Sanderson. "Or will you wait until you're charged as accessories after the fact?"

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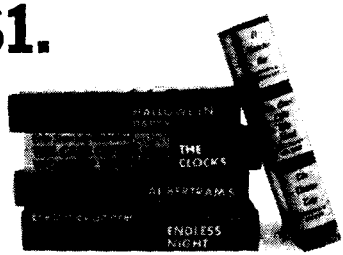

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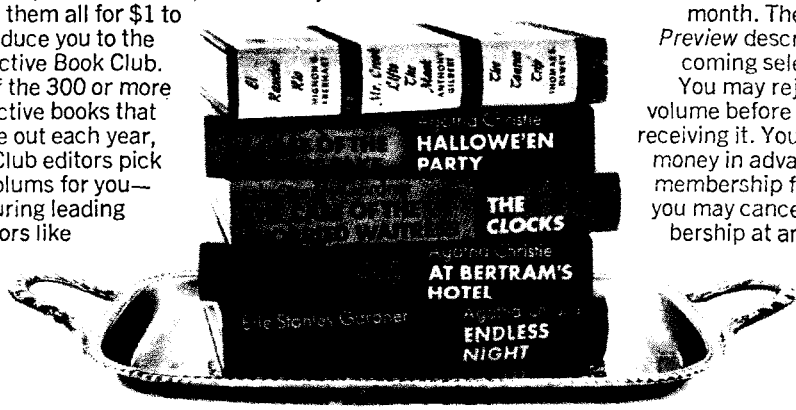

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